CutBank

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Article 1

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CutBank 23

СИТВАНК

23

CutBank

where the big fish lie

A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award
Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award

Karen Rasco

CutBank announces its new annual competition for the best short story and best poem published each year in CutBank. First Prize: $100.00 each category. Honorable Mention: $50.00 each category. Send submissions to: The Editors, Cut Bank, c/o English Department, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812.

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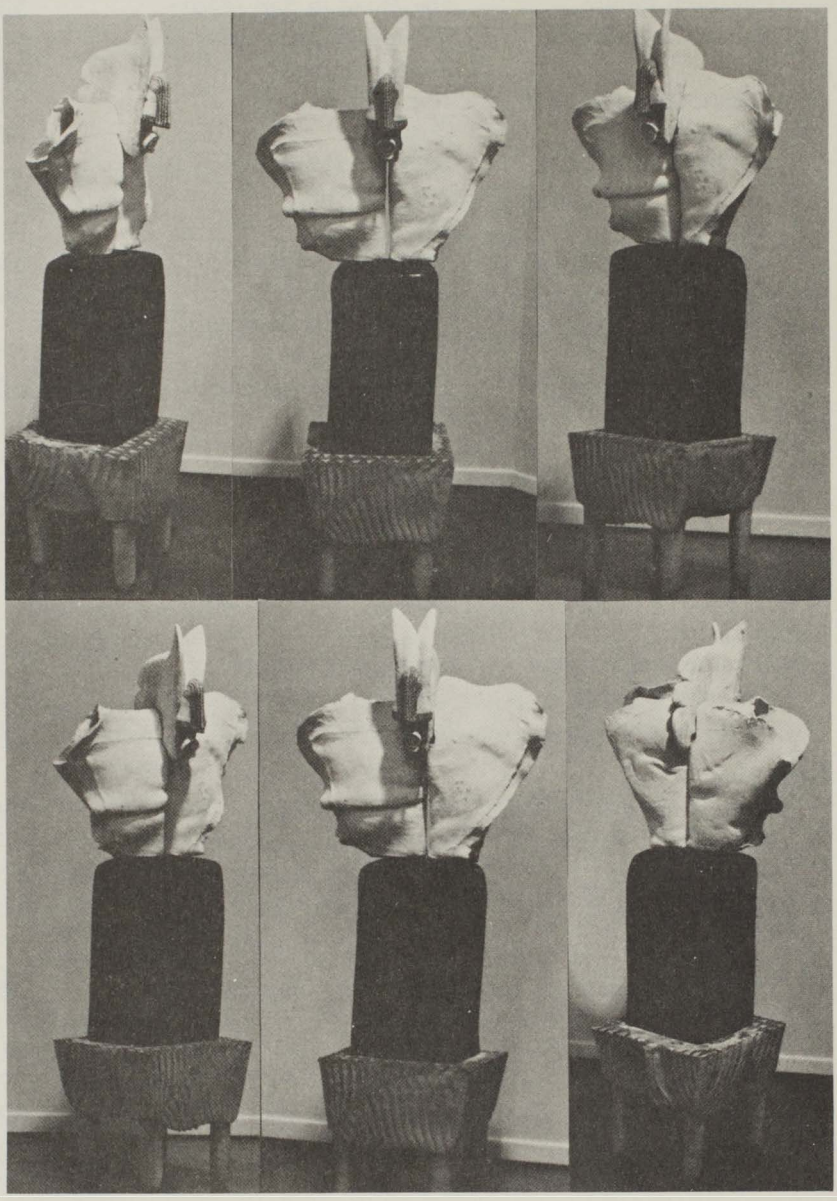
Novel Excerpts

Poetry



Black Box: Clay Sculpture by Fox Joy McGrew

Summerfield

"Fancy this," Harley said. He took hold of the cheekstrap on the bridle and the roan quivered between my legs. A war I'd never made had kept me away seven years. Some missing teeth and the splotch of scar tissue on my jaw, a streak of white hair over my right ear, and a shrapnel riddled memory were about all I had to show. I handed my grandfather the reins, and as I swung down, I saw that he was pleased.

The roan's chest was lathered around the edges of the martingale; he held still for a change as I loosened the cinch and rolled off the saddle, then spread his legs and shook himself to raise his hair, very casual, as if he understood that he was the center of something.

"How are you, Harley?" I asked.

"I'm still here," he answered, and jutting his whiskered jaw, boney now and square as the blunt end of an anvil, at the scar on my cheek, he asked, "How about yourself?"

I dug a ragged piece of metal from my watch pocket. "Here you go. A keepsake for you."

He inspected the fragment a moment, turned his grey eyes back to mine, and we shook hands under the horse's nodding nose. In the Great War he had been a breaker of horses. Like me, he'd never gone overseas, but he'd sure seen some things. He looked brittle now, but his hand was hard, his watery eyes sharp and steady. When he moved he moved with a deft quickness rare in large men. What betrayed him was the dewlap of skin above his buttoned collar, and the way his shirt bagged about his shoulders. Although the meat of him was gone, he seemed as strong and sure and careless as ever when he touched the horse. His eyes lingered on the roan's front shoulders, where the hard muscle rounded toward the chest. He ran his hand over these muscles, wiped away the froth, and rubbed the lather between his fingers. I'd seen Harley's calming influence on horses before; he claimed it was his smell. Whatever it was, the roan stood easy, like he'd been on the place all his life.

"Let's get out of this wind. Take him down to the calf pen. Put him in where he can shelter up. I'll start some coffee." He slid his hand down the horse's throat, letting it linger again on the muscled chest, feeling, I supposed, the great beating heart.

"Watch yourself he don't step on you," I said, taking the reins.

"He won't step on me," Harley answered. But as we passed, he smiled before turning toward the house.

I hung my halter and bridle on a stanchion header in the log barn. When I opened the east door for light I saw that the hay barn outside had fallen

sideways into a heap of broken beams and twisted iron that looked like the nest of some terrible meat-eating bird. Sheepsorrel, rye, timothy, barley, and nettles grew wild and too green around the grey wreckage. The hay barn had stood thirty-five feet high, big enough to hold one hundred tons of loose hay. I didn't see how I could not have missed it when I rode in.

What I had seen was that not much else had moved since I'd lived here last. The piles of warped lumber, mounds of scrap iron, scattered lengths of corrugated red tin, and hulks of rusty machinery lay in the same places, rotting and rusting in the same slow patterns of neglect. The partly-fallen chicken house, that seemed would never come completely down, and the antler-littered portable homestead cabin both leaned toward an unseen magnetism off south. The milkhouse, the newest building on the place, erected during the brief prosperity of Prohibition, had lost most of its shingles. And resting in a rock pile, like a long abandoned ark, was the paintless, forty foot houseboat where my brother and I had played pirate when we were children.

Through a dusty, web-hung window I watched the roan roll in the flakey soil outside, all four legs pawing air as he turned over on his back. The squall came in harder, the snow melting as fast as it hit the dry ground. On the bow of the old wreck I could just make out the name MABEL. The boat had some significance for Harley, but what it was I couldn't remember.

In the oat barrel, half a dozen leathery mice lay tits-up on the iron bottom. I latched the lid anyway. Above me, driven into the log purlins, I noticed the steel hooks, from which with chains and wide leather belly bands Harley had supported his starving work horses the year he'd come home from the army. That year was remembered for one season; it was still called the Winter of 1919.

Once they got down on you . . . He'd been all alone, snowed in with starving stock and dying horses and the hard-frozen graves of his parents. *. . . they stayed down.*

The roan stood and shook himself and looked about with interest at his new home. I decided to let him pick around in the weeds by the creek and fend for himself. There was no sense spoiling him with grain.

★

The year the United States put the Columbia Space Shuttle in orbit for the first time, the Montana Power Company ran the first electric line down the creek. The first thing I saw inside the house was the new Romex run-

ning up the log walls and along the broad-axed ceiling beams to naked 200 watt bulbs. Harley jerked a pull-string on, off, on. "Now I can see what I'm doing," he explained.

I smiled to see him proud of electric lights, but he'd lived alone a long time, and a life alone in the hills makes odd things special.

"Got running water too," he announced. He turned a tap above an ancient porcelain sink and stepped back. The faucet released a blast of air followed by spastic jets of water that splashed from the shallow sink and sprayed onto the floor.

"That's swell, Harley," I said and had to turn away to hide my grin.

Harley twisted the tap closed and winked. "No more packing water or frozen pump handles. Should of had this years ago. Now take a look at my system."

He kicked back a throw rug, exposing the trap door. I took hold of the iron ring and lifted the door open. Cobwebs stretched and broke as the underside of the door turned upward. A barn spider the size of a shrew waddled off onto the kitchen floor, and the flat odors of damp stone, mold, and dead air rose around us.

Harley went down three steps, pulled a string, and the cellar lit up. I followed, ducking to stay clear of webs and the flies and millers they'd caught. Against one stone wall a small pressure tank rested on half a fifty-five gallon barrel. Black plastic pipe ran from a break in the wall to the tank. Harley pointed at this pipe. I could see he was going to explain how it worked, and he did.

Carefully, with his fingers, he traced the route the water took.

I looked around as he talked. The wooden bins of sand for storing potatoes and carrots had fallen apart, spilling the sand onto the uneven stone floor. Crocks that had once held waterglass for keeping eggs stood upside down on mildewed boards. A set of four, new-looking antique car tires lay piled in one corner; cases of canned goods lined shelves along the wall beside the stairs. Off to one side, some dust-covered canning jars held blue and purple fruit. The fruit had been there as long as I could remember.

I looked back when Harley said the old well had gone sour. "Pump stem fell down the hole, and I said fine. Got on my new telephone and called Lindsey. Had him *drill* me one. Hundred feet deep, too." Beyond the crocks and car tires, the back wall had sloughed in, covering the floor with a couple feet of rotten rock. Harley had dug the original well by hand. And like the cellar, he'd dug it through solid hardrock with a single-jack, iron drills, and powder.

"What's this in these bottles?" I asked and picked up one of the canning jars. I shook the stuff inside; it looked like laboratory specimens of large, malignant growths.

"Plums," Harley answered. "Nasty looking, ain't it?"

He took the jar from my hand and placed it back on the shelf where it had been. "How long you going to be around?" he asked.

"Couple weeks, maybe, at the outside. I have an immigration hearing at the border soon, should be up there now, I guess."

"Well, Pilgrim, I'm going to need a hand the next ten days or so. Got to fix up those corrals and bring in my cows." He put his big hands in his overall pockets as if embarrassed. "We'll work on it together. I just need some help is all."

I took a cigarette from my shirt pocket and looked at my hospital soft hands. Harley looked at the Camel then at me. "You knew we put Summerfield down beside your grandma?"

"Yes. It wasn't fair."

"Not fair?" Harley leaned toward me as if he hadn't heard me right, until his finely shaped aquiline nose was six inches from my eye. "You mean the way you took off when your brother was coming home in a box? Or the way you joined up before we could get him under ground?"

"He was my brother, Harley. Not yours."

Harley's face turned the deep red of cheap wine. He opened his snaggy old mouth but only air came out. I saw that the anger stinging my eyes had hurt him too. "I'm sorry," I said. "Forget it."

"I won't forget that," Harley answered, and although he was in his eighties, I saw he still had me on height. It seemed right; I hadn't been back an hour and we'd had a scrap. Smoke said the way Harley and I got along was because we were too much alike, but I'd never been able to see it.

"Am I working for you or not?"

"Yes, you are working for me," my grandfather said, yet his face did not relax. My brother Summerfield had been four years older, and Harley had taken pride in him. Summer had an undershot jaw like a bull trout and the round-shouldered strength of a bull rider. We'd done a lot together, and he'd shown me many things, including the boreholes cut by Harley's twist-drills, which still showed in the cellar's granite walls.

Mr. Spock calms an overwrought Captain Kirk

Upstairs, I opened the door to the room Summer and I had shared and dropped my saddle on the floor beside the east window. Harley claimed

he put us on that side of the house so the sun would wake us first. And usually it did; we'd be up and out most mornings before Harley stirred. But then a lot of nights my brother and I fell asleep listening to the sounds of Harley working in the big shop.

The room appeared to have been shut a long time. A heavy layer of dust blanketed the bunks and chairs, the table where homework most often waisted untouched, and the uneven shiplap floor. To one side of the room, Summer's weights and press bench stood as he must have left them the spring he enlisted, still organized for the workouts he'd left behind.

I stripped the lower bunk, swept a shopping bag of dust and dust balls from the walls and floor, and with one of the rotten sheets, dusted down the furniture. On Summer's half of the table, a framed, color photograph of a slender, red-haired girl rested beside a new telephone. The girl, sitting on top a haystack, looked familiar, but the picture wasn't very clear. I took a folded paper from my wallet, spread it on the table, and dialed the long number. Outside, I could see the roan walking from the creek toward the barn, swishing his tail lazily in the late sun which had followed the little storm. A familiar, muted voice said hello in my ear.

"How's the gimp there girl?"

"Braindamage? Where are you?"

The roan stopped and I saw a black cat walking toward him from the tin-sided shelter shed. The roan pointed his ears at the cat, cocked his head, and backed a step. "I'm at my grandad's place in the hills. I'm going to have to stick around here for a while. Just a little while."

"You sound great!" she said. "How are you doing?"

"I've been working on a colt — well, not exactly a colt. But see, the old man isn't well, and I promised to stay and help him out for a couple of weeks. I'm sorry." The leggy cat advanced across the barnyard until the roan shied out of his way. The cat looked straight ahead as he passed.

After a pause, she said, "I'll call Mr. Kittredge and let him know you won't start work right away." Then, almost in the same breath, "Jack! The bonegraft is working. I can walk!"

"And I can talk," I laughed.

"We'll be walking-talking fools," she answered, laughing too. The roan, slinking forward, one slow step at a time, was following the cat into some weeds.

★

I hung the dish pans on the wall behind the Monarch range, switched

off the overhead light, and lit the Aladdin lamp on the table. Several days worth of month-old papers lay piled in the kindling box. I pulled one out and scanned the headlines. The PLO had killed some children; the IRA had killed some bystanders; university students from Missoula had been arrested for protesting a Minuteman missile installation. One article caught my attention, a front page story titled: "Big Sky Endures, Despite Dark Clouds," which told how removing sagebrush for an Arnold Palmer Associates golf course in the Gallatin Canyon had proven much tougher than planners first expected.

I glanced in at Harley, bent forward in his Lazy Boy, absorbed in a Star Trek rerun. The last of the Charlie Russell cowboys, he'd lived into an era of satellite TV, Big Macs, and ICBMs. He had become a relic of his time, when dry grass had been good as gold, when men were ranked by the way they handled animals. I walked into the parlor and sat down beside him.

"What are you going to do for hay this winter, Harley?" I asked. "I see the barn is down."

"Barn's been down two years. This year I won't have to feed. We're going to ship the whole mess to Butte." He turned the sound down, so we could talk, but he kept his eyes on the spaceship, intent on Mr. Spock, who calmed an overwrought Captain Kirk. The *Enterprise* warp-sixed into lines of light and disappeared. Harley slapped his leg.

I remembered noticing that none of the hay meadows had been cut; the timothy, browned and headed-out, stood bowed under its own slender weight. I'd seen that too, when I rode in, and it just hadn't clicked.

"Lost fifty percent of my calves last winter, and it was an open year." Harley leaned back in the recliner. "I've run cattle fifty years, but I ain't going to keep on if I can't do it right." He looked over at me. "I'll settle on a time with Laramie and Ted and Amy. You brace up those corrals. I got to line up trucks and inspectors too, and you need to learn that horse of yours to turn around inside of twenty acres."

I hadn't expected black whirlies, just sitting there chewing the dog. But when they came I hung to my chair and pretended I understood what Harley was saying. As if explaining to a little boy what he maybe couldn't quite explain to himself, Harley said, "There are other things too. Lots of changes around here. Dahls, I guess you know, sold out while you were gone. Sold to a big outfit from out of state, land and cattle company called Tanner. They put some cows on the range for a couple seasons — way more than the grass could stand."

Harley rubbed his whiskered jaw. "When their cows got shelly by fall they decided the range wasn't any good unless they had it all." Harley laughed, but his voice was mean. "So they started in hassling us who own land this side of Casey Creek."

Harley drew a line across his palm with his index finger. "That splits the summer range in half — besides ruining the country — and just generally puts the screws to the rest of us."

"But now that I'm back . . ." I said, feeling the dizziness easing off.

Harley snorted through his nose. "We expected you back four or five years ago." He tapped his fingers on the recliner and watched Lt. O'Hura mince around the control room in her miniskirt.

"What about Ted and the Fords? And Amy?"

Shadows from the Aladdin's fluted chimney fluttered on the hewn ceiling beams. The *Enterprise* fired balls of energy into deep space. "Last July, Tanners parked a half-dozen horse trailers at Rocker Gulch and twenty of those jailbirds they call cowboys took off in every direction, counting brands and taking pictures." The enemy craft burst into particles of phosphorescent light. "And since they claim to own over thirty sections out there now, and I only have two, they said — their *lawyers* said — I've got to get my cows off their grass.

"Don't their cattle graze your grass too? If this outfit wants them off, let 'em fence them off."

"That is just exactly what I told them." Harley turned in his chair and the thin leather squeaked under him. "But come to find out, they don't give a damn about grass. They're after *land.* Any land they can lay hands on, any by Christ way they can."

"So let them shit in one hand and wish in the other."

Harley grinned. "Sure. Like you say, they got to fence my cattle out, if push comes to shove."

I sensed a punch line that I couldn't quite see. I fumbled with my makings, spilling the fine cut tobacco on my knees.

"Then I hear at Duncan's how some of their jailbirds had been in spouting off about how the range was going to get cleared one way or the other. Don't take much imagination to see how a few drunks with .22s could put you out of the beef business in one moonlit night."

I pulled a fresh paper and started to roll another smoke.

"I'm not getting a range war started at my age. Seventy-five is too old for that nonsense."

Harley'd turned seventy-five when I started college. Somewhere back then he'd just drawn the line.

"Why don't you all get together? You and Schillings and Fords and fence your sections into one big unit?"

"You think about that a minute," Harley said, "and don't light that weed in here. I've got enough trouble with my wind without breathing your smoke."

"If you would all fence your ground," and as I said it, I saw it. Harley's punchline. "There isn't any water out there."

"You're pretty sharp," Harley said. "For a pilgrim."

I took the cigarette apart, folded a new paper, and began again, willing my hands steady. Each morning, I remembered, for a week in October, Harley and Summerfield and I would leave before dawn and lead our horses home in the dark. All day we rode the brushy bottoms and browngrass hills, bringing in one small bunch of grass-heavy cattle at a time. Harley hadn't turned seventy-five then, and he rode all day too, making sure we didn't run his cows, keeping an eye on saddle sores and hooves. What an outfit we were: Summer, usually riding a green-broke colt for somebody, Harley on the buckskin he called Chesterfield, and me, with one horse or another nobody else wanted, riding a saddle no one else would use. And Harley, in charge, telling us how, when the country was young, he'd caught the bands of unbranded colts in the bald hills, and sold them branded within a week, broke to ride.

The Horses Running

The corrals consisted of one large circular arena with pole gates opening east and west into runways, holding pens, and chutes. The big central corral had first been built by spiking rails to convenient trees in a rough circle. The rest had been added piecemeal over the years.

From the pole gate on the north side of the arena, two barbed wire fences fanned out through the trees for a quarter of a mile, making a hidden, funnel-shaped lane. Animals pressed down this narrowing trap entered the corral before they even saw it.

Most of the original trees had died and been cut down. Great fire-blackened pitch posts had been set in the ground between the stumps, but by now, most of them had rotted off too and were held up only by the sagging rails.

I spent a couple days sawing up rails and cutting the rotten ends off the posts when they fell over. I dug new holes, planted the posts again, and tamped them tight. The soil was decomposed granite, good digging except for pine roots. My hands blistered on the iron fence bar, and my shoulders ached from its weight. *They'd leave in the moonlight. I was always up to watch them go. They would move out quiet, like shadows leading horses.*

The loading chute's main upright posts, which had been actual trees, sawed off high, had rotted away too. The old chute swayed as I walked

up the plank floor, but the sides, made of twelve-inch, rough-cut fir lumber, were still sound. Harley's idea had been to shore up the weakest panels, set a few posts where needed, and get the gates to open enough to slick us by. But everytime I pulled one thing loose, something somewhere else fell down. Harley finally couldn't stand watching from the house any longer. He backed a brand new Chevy pickup from the shop, drove down, and looked around. "Won't have anything left pretty soon," he told me.

I shrugged, wiped the dryrot dust from my sweating face, and sawed on. The fastest way was the right way, and the work kept me from thinking about where I ought to be. *I'd help my mother milk, separate the cream, and clean the separator; I'd split enough kindling and stove wood for a week and pack a couple buckets of water up from the spring pipe. When I couldn't find anything else to do except get in the way, I'd climb a rock behind the barn and I'd listen and I'd wait.*

Smoke shut his logging operation down for a few days and showed up with his hay truck. He had the semi loaded with sixty green lodgepole rails, some fourteen-foot oak switch ties for gate and chute posts, and my Ford truck, chained down over the back wheels. He got out, looked around, shook his head and said "I thought you were in a hurry to get out of here."

I helped him shake the chain binders loose along the side of the semi trailer. "What's with my pickup?" I asked.

"Friday night," Smoke answered, the famous grin flashing on his handsome face. " 'So come on wheels, take this boy to town.' "

"Another hot date?"

"You got that right, Jackson."

"Well, Emmylou Harris she's not."

We began carrying rails to where we'd need them. Smoke packed two at a time, the muscles beneath his T-shirt swelling, the sinews in his heavy arms corded and hard. I carried one at a time, in another direction.

When we'd unloaded the truck, Smoke brought a canvas waterbag to where I sat on the railroad ties. He took a long drink, poured some water on the bandana, and wiped his face.

"What I wouldn't give for a frosted mug of beer."

"Drink water," Smoke said, handing me the Desert Bag, "you'll piss just as far."

"Two more weeks and I'll be home, drinking beer and pissing foam."

Smoke cocked his head. I heard it too, the rolling, thudding impact of distant incoming, muted by the timber around us. I stood, felt myself tighten.

Smoke glanced at me. "They're working this way," he said. "Sounded like war up Crystal Creek yesterday."

I wet my face, neck, and arms with the dripping bandana. "What's this land and cattle company deal?"

"Tanners? Oh, they're movers and shakers. Lots of money. They've been buying up land here and west of the Divide, which is funny, really, the way the cattle market has been."

The spaced detonations came again, and I could imagine the rounds landing in the woods, the yellow-white flashes tearing earth from under trees, the singing-hot slivers of iron meeting wood.

★

Smoke worked that day and the next, as steady and strong and enduring as a mountain mule. With drawknives we peeled two sides of each pole and took turns nailing them in place. The seven-inch, ringshank spikes drove hard in the fire-tempered posts; Smoke's late night in town didn't show in the way he swung a hammer.

The roan, loose in an acre of enclosed grass and weeds below the corral, stood at ease under a barn eave and watched our progress. I'd been riding him a couple hours each evening. He was coming along. I'd even tried him once bareback, going up the meadows along the creek and past the old teepee rings, where the graves of my family lay in a sheltered park among some bull pine. Summer's grave had grassed over too, and except for the government stone, it looked like native prairie.

When Harley saw the new panels of fresh-peeled poles and the newly braced chute and the solid posts anchoring the gates, he acted like the whole design had been his idea.

"See?" he said to me. And nodding to Smoke he added, "Right, June?" His nickname for my father had to do with late spring calves, but I never really understood the whole significance.

Harley puffed up the slight incline inside the main arena, until he had to stop his inspection to catch his wind. He stood with his back to us, looking toward the fallen hay barn, as if planning something in that direction.

"Jesus, he looks rough," Smoke said under his breath. I held up a rail so he could spike it home. The shock of his hammer blows traveled up my arms and seemed to dead end in my teeth. "We've got to be real careful he doesn't get hurt while we're working those cattle," he whispered. "Harley will want to get right in there with us, and he'll get mad if we try to keep him out of the way. Keep your eyes open. Watch out for him, so he don't get run over."

Harley turned and started toward us, pulling on a pair of yellow rag

gloves as he walked. "So how's this girlfriend, Smoke?" I asked.

"She's a lot more fun than logging, kid. You can't believe . . ."

Harley picked up the light end of a rail without waiting on us. Smoke took the other end and together they lifted it for me to nail.

"This is lodgepole," Harley said.

"Yeah, lodgepole," Smoke answered.

"Well, why didn't you cut fir? This crap won't last fifteen years!" With a sudden flash of anger, as if it had been working in him a while, Harley faced my father and said: "And why, for sweet Jesus sake, don't you cut your damn hair?"

★

Sunday afternoon, as I was putting the finishing touches on a squeeze chute gate, I heard a truck pull in at the house. Amy and Annie Stevens climbed out and took some boxes inside. The plank gate had swollen, and I planed wood from the outer edge until it closed snug. We would clip every brand when we brought in the cattle. We'd need good luck and gates that worked to get it done. *You would hear the men first, yelling and swearing. I'd double-check the gates, run, and squeeze down a crack in the rocks out of sight. They'd hit the flat this side of the Veracruz and you could recognize each man's voice: Lester Cotkey, Uriel Reed, the Skows and Flavvens, and Harley. It would get quiet again when they entered the trees behind the bluff. Then all at once, you heard them. The horses running.*

I put my tools away, brushed off my jeans, and emptied my cuffs. It looked like a different place now, and I guessed it was. No unbranded colts ran the Bald Hills, and the horsemen who had taken them were gone.

When they came, they came fast, down through the rocks and trees as hard as they could run — and they could run — raising dust that hid the riders behind. By then they knew they were between fences, and when they saw that open gate, they'd grunt and buck on through like they were home free. They were horses like you don't see any more, every color and cross, but almost all part workhorse. They were range horses, and among them some dandies. My job was to close the gate behind the last one without getting run down by the riders. I was seven, eight, nine years old.

"Summerfield," "Mr. Spock calms an overwrought Captain Kirk," and "The Horses Running" are 3 chapters excerpted from Ralph Beer's novel-in-progress, *The Blind Corral.*

Collage by Karen Rasco

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Rafting the Brazos

Downriver rocks were rapids. All summer
after chores we dragged our tractor inner tubes,
patched like Uncle Murphy's face on Sunday,
and launched them on the wide flat water.

We shoved them out to the middle,
kicking our feet like frogmen. Splashing,
our dogs barking on the bank behind us,
we cursed each other for distance.

Someone always cheated. At fourteen
games are serious as sex. Everything
has rules and everybody breaks them.
And so the day Durwood Stanley slumped over

on his tube and dropped his paddle
we passed him and jeered at whatever stunt
he was pulling, watching nothing but brown
water turn foam-white up ahead.

Each of us fought for flumes
through the boulders, the only way
to keep on breathing, catching our breath
and plunging under water, each man for himself,

boiling in hell and out again, back on the Brazos
mud-brown, flowing as if it hadn't happened.
Laughing, wiping our eyes and bragging our ride
was the damnedest ever, we finally saw

Durwood's empty red and blue patched tube bob by,
riding high on the river, bulging like lungs
held too long, about to burst.
Later, our fathers reasoned the doctor found

no water in his lungs, nothing we could do
to save him, no matter how long we pumped
after we pulled him out, how long
we huffed and blew into his rubber mouth.

The Sawmill

When the sun came up
sawdust rose into the breeze
and remained in the air all day
as it did in our eyes. But none of us
drove to work the next day
or for the rest of the week.
The tin-roofed operation
run by four men was quiet
and those driving by only imagined
our movements in the building's shadows.

By evening an orange glow
burned down beneath the shrinking mound
of charred slab wood behind the mill.
Smoke rose in thin trails
but smelled nothing like incense.
When a car rushed through the valley
and up the hill, its beams
moved like a flashlight
through an empty closet.

Around midnight
a dog might have returned to the mill,
nosing over hickory bark
or scraps of yellow poplar,
looking for a bone.
He might have smelled something
lifelike in the air,
and if he had walked near the circular saw,
sniffing the dampness
on the stained, wooden floor,
he would have lapped dried blood
until his mouth was full of dust.

When I try to think of you
and that morning,
think of you doing anything,
cursing, spitting tobacco, shoving boards,
there is always the awful ring of that saw,
your legs kicking at nothing,
the drenched log sliding toward me.

The Sleepwalker

Sometimes in the quiet abandonment of night
when the elms weave gauzily against the sky
and the years turn over like blown leaves,
I see him sleeping under the trees
grown up around the house of my birth.
He rises, holding only the rain in his arms,
and deftly climbs the knotted stairs
into the cathedral of the locust.
Waking,
uncertain to which world he belongs,
he teeters momentarily on a branch
and then, like huge ridiculous fruit,
he falls the ten feet back to earth.
In the sudden applause of insect hum
he lays there, a soloist, recalling nothing.
He stalks the memory of himself.

Above the porch one light burns, a single match
lit against all the world's darkness
and out of that darkness
he travels in dignity and confusion.

On My Father's Gun Rack Is A Japanese Sword

From the colorless war.
The Life magazine war, a Japanese officer
frozen, evil Jap grin on his face,
sword high above his head. He is
going to behead the kneeling soldier.
Prisoners in the picture stand witness.
I look for my father's face.

I pull the sword from the sheath.
The blade lights the room. I lick
and taste the steel, slice
air and thrust.
It has been silent on the gun rack,
silent as my father. The Jap sword
sings ghost songs. My father says nothing

of the jungle rot still on his hands,
the Death March, the headless soldier
I never see. When I dream
I am hunting with my father
he does not give me his sword,
he gives his rifle.
His hands are scaley.
Through the scope,
his heart is huge.

Obedience

That smokestack, for instance,
in the vacant lot across the street:
if she could order it down and watch
it float in lapse-time over buckled tar and macadam
it would stop an inch or two perhaps
before her patent leather shoes.

Her body's no longer tender, but her mind is free.
She can think up a twilight, sulfur
flicking orange then black
as the tip of a flamingo's wing, the white
picket fence marching up the hill . . .

but she would never create such puny stars.
The house, shut up like a pocket watch,
those tight hearts breathing inside—
she could never invent them.

Aircraft

Too frail for combat, he stood
before an interrupted wing,
playing with an idea, nothing serious.
Afternoons, the hall gaped with aluminum
glaring, flying toward the sun; now
though, first thing in the morning, there was only
gray sheen and chatter
from the robust women around him
and the bolt waiting for his rivetter's
five second blast.

The night before in the dark
of the peanut gallery, he listened to blouses shifting
and sniffed magnolias, white
tongues of remorse
sinking into the earth. Then
the newsreel leapt forward
into war.

Why *frail*? Why not simply
family man? Why wings, when
women with fingers no smaller than his
dabbled in the gnarled intelligence of an engine?

And if he gave just a four second blast,
or three? Reflection was such

a bloodless light.
After lunch, they would bathe in fire.

The Rain Between Us

How many times your small wrists
like the narrow ankles of deer vanish

into the underbrush! Impenetrable
as winter rain

at airports, saying goodbye
panic: the swift whites of your eyes
roll out of sight,

brown animal haunches shudder
and move away.

Under a whisper of dry leaves
like razors

the rain between us falls
always cold, at a distance

that is no one's fault
or everyone's, why feelings

wear gloves, hide themselves
at the far edge of the forest . . .

I beg you to come nearer.

Years ago, at the hospital
when Mother was dying we embraced

just barely, shy of each other as two horses
standing in a cold field.

Perhaps we were too close
growing up,

perhaps I frightened you with my bright
older sister's
chatter.

Since then there have been long silences,
caves in echoing woods,

but now there are steel traps
in the far off, trembling country
you ran away from us to live in

I'm still frightened, it's the same thing,
the animals are still at it,

snarling over the white body
of an elegant city this time

with bombs chattering, blind tanks
you're caught all over again, don't you see

when we meet next time, in the open
at long last let me say it

in my own voice, naked
as the raw sounds of home,

Come back to your life and live it
before you lose it take hold of it

with your two hands that are not hooves
nor weapons either, but sisters
that talk, that lift things together.

Scrub Pines

We are jointed, gerontocrats, a geometer's dream,
bolder than lichens, we square and skew

our limbs into a slow addition of angles,
increasing the world's degrees.

Like the mushrooms, that grow round-edged
and flaccid on manure,

we conform to our soil,
the compost of monks who fed on water, salt, and bran,

the matter for the meager annual rings
we squeeze into our thin corsets of air.

Needless of needles, or the light they convert,
we are the limbs we go out on,

neither leading nor following,
staying out of the way,

pivots of the spinning which men at our side
see when they look over the cliff.

We are above all, inedible,
Melchizedeks on our ground.

Blight and rot starve;
in winter, as they emaciate like us,

browsing deer pass by on their acute bones,
repelled by our fixity.

Margins

The park's old men play their checkers
under a sun imported from the Mediterranean
and never sweat in their flannel shirts—
their flesh, shrunk close to the bone,
quickly loses heat.
They pinch off gobs of Red Man,
ruminate before each move.
One wins now and then;
both would like more pieces,
a bigger board, a longer game.
One may stop to spit and tell a story,
now bigger than what it recalls—
the last bear in these parts,
flush days before the Crash,
limbs lost in the tractor plant.
At six they go home to wives or memories,
dead or dying in various degrees,
a shot of bourbon out of Social Security,
papers and TV.
After the anthem they sleep a few light hours,
again wearing new spats and gold cufflinks,
living high on margins.

Max the Tire King

Hardly an empire. Rims
and tubes of things, a kingdom of air.
Max is dead. His daughter would sell
the ramshackle land, the coiled towers
of tires, if only the will
had not made this a refuge.
While the lawyers argue
against the codicil, I drive past
the abandoned office, the fences,
the billboard with its hyperbole.
It is March, overcast, unpretty.
The tires settle in drifts
like old men turning from the wind.
In his last days, patient
with the inconstant cancer,
Max would wander through the yards,
hands in his pockets, or feeling
for treads. He would come home late,
locking the tall barbed-wire gates
against the perpetual threat of vandals.

Attending the Garage Sale

after your death at 92

Your house is opened, each chair
and table with its price,
the garage filled with its cartons
of *ten cents each* and lines
hung with your dresses.
I cannot decide whether to come,
to rummage.

By the time I arrive, your life
has been scooped out.
At a back door, alone,
I look at your yard a last time:
grapes dried to raisins
on the vines; the fruit trees
you planted not yet dormant.

In the garage, for my daughters
I dig up stray dishes
mottled as if centered for years
under your pots of rooted cuttings.
For me I gather your music:
songs where you pencilled
your name at twenty.

At the last I uncover,
as it catches at my hand,
the small, heart-shaped cushion
you made for sewing. For hours
you crocheted this interlock
of fine chain. . . . Look how it carries
your scatter of pins.

Falling

I

The mare shies under me streaming
sideways my knees fold and unfold

like wings against the dark leather.
The curb and snaffle lace through

my fingers and my palms bristle
with her gray mane. I lean against

the center of gravity: her long dappled
shoulders whitewater over her bones.

A shot in the open field,
she rears up, eyes

white the hunter in her
washed away the quick blue

flashing of her metal shoes.
As I fall, I look through my hands, see

flags of light reins loose ribbons
and want to cover my face.

II

The mare returns to her stall, her
dappled coat dotted with indigo, the liniment
and salve for her wounds

that never heal the ropes that tie her
keep her steady on her feet out and
far away from the milky webbed walls.

She has splintered two stalls
kicking steady as a mule and here paws
the floor bald in a few hours, neatly

squaring all the hay behind her
outside the need for four walls
outside her high sensate head.

Her taste instead is for space and she chews
the wood to tufts around the latches'
glinty screwed-in stubs.

Let out, she runs
over fences, just mended, over ground, just dug
over her shadow rippling under her hooves.

III

I wake sitting up. Eyes
plunge the dark—the raw
current sprints my spine,
the unknown breaks in waves vertebrae.

I am afloat on my bed sheets peeled down
as she flies by the open window,
a trail of tiny bubbles
blurring the glass. She's out.

I run to meet her, a spastic swimmer
through the doors pawing at the openings.
The cold mud seeps back in the quick
impression of her hooves smoothed over.

I listen for the return of hoofbeats.
We stand off—a steady arm raised, points
and follows the mare as she looms
in and out of the trees.

We run to track her, not to catch her.
She will fall and we are running short of breath.
The frontyard mud sends her down
thrashing snake-like on the ground.

Talking low to the mare's deaf dread
we pull the knot tight.
She is listening to everything
outside this night the black holes

where her hooves have been. Her eyes
film the unseen—the drowned birds
of her life let themselves down,
slow weights that surface in her dapples,

the perfect stones with no edges.
Her nostrils deepen red—the thin coat of blood
bubbles with her breath. Our hands rise up to touch
the mare whose chest is not rising.

We fall away, fence the fear
from ourselves, stiffen with
the widening of our own sight—
no longer one, no longer two, no longer three.

Halves of One Abstraction

In my dream I look at the covers
of some books by South African writers.
Among them is a novel I have never read
about father-son rivalry and war.
On the jacket, silhouettes of two men
face directly away from each other
and form halves of one abstraction.
In one of those curious turns that occur
so often in a dream I become a character
in the book, and am taken to a field
by a man who pretends to be my father.
He is a weak man, unfair and wrong,
but I do not know if he is weak
and therefore not my father, or simply
another man who shares my father's gift,
or even if I've made the whole thing up:
my father, his weakness, the rivalry.
I only know it is right for me
to endure this punishment in a meadow
full of grass, a light wind blowing,
the sky gray and troubled overhead.
So I turn my back upon him slowly
and a young woman speaks in my ear,
guiding my attention to a small farm
at the edge of the grassland on a hill.
A cloud shifts, and winter sun spills
over brown stone walls and red tiles.
My father pokes one finger into my back,
pressing just above the lumbar.
This causes me no particular pain,
only a vague discomfort, like a wound
that needs one stitch, and I set out
for that house on the distant hill,
though I know there's no one home.

Giotto's Maesta

A door, a room, a story.
She begins
by loving the child.
She sits in a dark cape, with the diffused
light falling
on her face, her darker
hands holding the baby unconsciously well,
the distance yellow,
her eyes strained with concentration.
She gives off the enormous heat
of new

perspectives, their rightness
frozen
as if in rock.
Everything is tenuously
angled, and the closeness
of the space is set in her face.
She begins
to turn toward the child.
The painter has fixed her in our eyes
so steadily that she is afraid
she will fall

into the solidity of the earth.
It is hard to hold these tangibilities.
She is unaware of our gaze.
The baby moves his hand on her breast.
She readjusts him, and listens
for movements in this world, what corporeality
there is.
Her child is what she treasures, not
the weighted stillness
of the people watching, or what
they think, or if

they think of her,
mothering him.
Sometimes she feels the cold from the varnish
of what frames her
numb her face.
She begins
to understand this,
that her gestures to her baby must be small,
must be seen only in time.
They will never let her forget
who she is.

Her Clues

Gull tracks, hieroglyphs—her printed pages
lead and follow me:
lining the streets which choose
my steps, her phrases glow
like Jack-o'-lanterns, like street lights
glaring their slight pink on potential crime.
In my mind of minds she makes perfect sense
less and less and more and more.

With his fingertips, my child
makes a night sky happen,
the stars like grains of salt,
a chain reaction of lights
on the library computer screen.
Outside the plate glass windows,
rain falls straight down, in chords,
the repetition of some final word.

All afternoon rain comes down,
all afternoon my child plays with the sky,
choosing seasons, nebulae, constellations—
then a math game. Suddenly, the rain doesn't fall
and we go home through grass going up in a cheer,
whole stadiums of green blades rising at once
while her clues glisten in puddles:
you have lost, you have won, you are grass,

pavement, air through which everything flows
in its very own blindness.
You are a verb on a cup hook,
a lower case letter, a run-on sentence;
a covered wagon, a chariot, a toy car
parked in a tow-away zone. Take care,
for you are the language
scribbled on the bottled drifting note.

Parliament of Ravens

Late spring in the mountains. Seven ravens gaze down on the low-lying world and their bristly yellow beaks point and gesticulate. Not sunlight but hauteur makes their plumage iridescent; and not the northernly wind but the notion of plunder swivels their sleak heads now toward one farm, now another: If the horizon should turn indigo with the promise of rain, we will travel to Straumness . . . if pinholes of light appear through the clouds, then we will invade Baer . . . no, Baer is seeded more by scree than by grass . . . On and on they croak in these hungry heights. For they are deciding (as with all legislators) which lambs to kill.

Turkeys

It was nice to know we'd soon be rich.
"A change is good as a rest," Father
said, making plans to bring 200
baby turkeys home. "You don't call
them 'baby turkeys.' You're supposed
to call them 'poults.' " He showed
us in the manual it was true.
So we called them poults, told all
our friends that meant baby turkeys—
we read it in a book. They were impressed.

The feed store man got fifty extra—
"just in case some die." Dad agreed:
"As long as we've got to be rich, anyway,
it can't hurt being rich fifty turkeys
more." He moved us from our bedroom,
put papers on the floor: "It's just
till spring gets warmer. Can't let
our assets freeze." We boys slept
outside, in a tent, and froze . . . at least
it beat sleeping on the parlor floor.

"Kyoke! Kyoke! Kyoke!" The dumb things
never learned the sense of silence.
In fact they never learned much sense
at all except the sense to panic
if a mouse ran underneath the roost
or an owl said, "Boo!" Then all two
hundred six (the feed store man was
right, a few did die) would find a different
place to hide. Should one concoct some hare-
brained notion to fly the coop, they'd all
take wing—over the fence, across
canals—we had to lift each back, one

by one. We slept outside all summer
(in case of thieves), and could
hardly wait till harvest when we'd
get to cut their bloody throats.

The feed man hadn't said too much
of plucking, how the last pin feathers
can't be pulled by hand: "Leave one
in, it's graded C." It took pliers,
petulance, and luck (most of it bad)
to get the big job done. We cursed
each stubborn wing, blessed the day
the cat broke in killing ten, the wind
that blew seventeen in the ditch
to drown. Had there been a thief
we'd have all been glad, knowing come
plucking time he'd get his just deserts.

Next year no one objected when one
day Dad announced he planned to sell
the brooders second hand. "Why don't we
just stay poor," said Mother, "we're good
at that." "Well alright, if that's what you
want, but I met this guy who raises baby
pigs, and . . ." She cut him off:
"You're supposed to call them swine."

I guess somewhere she read a book.

Spring Comes to the Clearwater

Outside Kooskia, Idaho
where the mill closed last week,
April stirs in the roots of grass
as if everyone
had work.

Daffodils don't give a damn
that the hardware store
closed forever last month
or that some hardluck logger
shot the guy next door.

The river blunders along
leaving boulders to bleach in the sun
like the vertebrae of
long dead animals
thrown by the roadside.

Casual brown butterflies
quietly fling themselves
at windshields.

About those boys who
liquored themselves into a fatal
bend of the river yesterday,
the crocus, white and yellow,
have nothing to say.

Entering the Desert

for Jamake Highwater

the sun has died
on her breasts
while in her eyes, somewhere

beyond the horizon, lurks
the origin of your life.
she is wed to this desert.

her hand holds a blade
of aloe, the knife
that heals

and her spine will bloom
just once for you
like yucca for the moon

The Death of a Cow

I had just finished seeing my life again
In the blind of the dangerous curve
When I came upon them.
In yet another unbending rain
That cruel Virginia June,
I was rounding the dangerous curve
On Holcomb Rock when a posse of farmers
In pickups put up their hands to stop us.

It was brown, big, and alive,
Half-submerged in front of the culvert
Through which the normally gentle Judith Creek ran.
I rolled the window down and peered out through
The interference of rain; their bodies
Were forms, almost alien, in the familiar terrain
As they struggled to pass the thick ropes down
To Ed and Jim who then tied them securely
In bowlines around its midsection, a cow.

The waters, rising fast, cut through
Their skin and whirled in panic;
The odds against them were rising fast
As they put their slippery blistered hands
To the task, as though they were saving themselves.
The cow seemed to bring them out to themselves
With her dumb high head lowing away
And the whites of her eyes which mirrored
Her milk and thereby the one clear thread
Of livelihood that ran like a blessing
Through their lives.

Someone said they saw some blood
In the water, although the mud was red
From the clay and mixing quickly in
From the banks. "Probably shot
By some bastard hunter," another said,
Tugging away.
I would have liked to stay
And watch them pull her free
But as the crucial minutes passed
Beyond hope and into a matter of time,
I could already see her dead,
Sunk whole in the swirl.
Now cleared to move along, I did,
I did inside the hum,
The splashing wiping monotone
Of the short leg home.

Needy Relatives

Dust

It wipes a dark hand across the unused
Surfaces of love, fixes on sill and lid,

Or wafts a slow descent in afternoon sun
As the house sleeps,—exposed to no one.

But we know its presence like a body
In the closet, the exclusions of a will.

With it too has reticience become habit,
Silent as an old feud squatting on heirlooms.

—Distinctly it has the family nose,
And the same posture of indifference. . .

This gray fellow settles in with a laugh:
The blackguard cousin home again, for keeps.

Earth

We feel it pulling at sleeve and boot,
Its little whine, the pleading that sickens,

Unabashed appeals to fill its purse
With coins of eye and bone. *The old debt,*

It whispers, snuggling its gape of a mouth
Up to our necks. We have to dread

That kiss, the dank breath, drabness it wears
Like bulky coats from a Goodwill rack,

Dark, cumbersome. And the crude jewels of summer,
Glowing like dimestore glass, the gay fringe

Of green, the plaintive gesture of fingers
Waving like hope from beneath the family tree.

Night

The old blackmailer arrives as we dream,
His pockets bulging with dark secrets.

This one says nothing, his language the blank
Stare of the truly needy. When he crooks

His dirty fingers, hands gaping like pits,
Even paupers empty their coffers,

And kings throw down their treasures before him,
And girls their young beauty—never enough

For one whose wants are legion, his hunger
Raging like villains, desire a great hole

Of black: his tent pitched in enemy camp,
His kinsmen turning in sleep from him.

Still Lives in Detroit, #5

In the alley behind Simpson's Market
two boys and an older man stand stained
in aprons, lean against the dumpster's smell.

In the field between Simpson's and Delta Drugs
broken glass, candy wrappers, footprints
lie frozen in earth.

Three cigarettes smoke the air.
Across the street, the high school
spills toward them.

The boys pose in faded letter jackets
playing hooky briefly again, stamp
guns on their belts.

The man is smiling as one boy speaks.
He is watching the back door, measuring distances.
No clues to what has put him here.

If I could, I would watch until the mud
took in new shapes, shifted with possibility.
What could be a rat moves through the picture.

The Game of "Statues"

I swerve the narrow road at low tide,
the lagoon buffed to silver by the sky.
The car radio is delivering

the news. An egret
stands motionless on one leg, then falters,
labors against grace
before it finds its element.
Against the spread of wet light beside the road
I see from another landscape

Rancho Seco, its huge inverted funnels.
Around them a gypsy's song
already coming from the speakers
thins like blown glass.
This report just now—they're closing
the plant, although its invisible Xenon 133 fumes
pose no threat. This is not

child's play, we might
be stopped at any moment
not by the usual bell or whistle; hands
clapped over the eyes,
the mouth to remain open
in a terrified rictus.

The End of the Line

Half the minnows are dead
before we find a spot that suits us both.
We light the lantern and check carefully
the places we will sit, wary by now
of unseen dangers: poison ivy, ant hills.
I fish on the bottom,
use the turkey livers that disgust every sense,
willing to take anything that comes along.
You hook minnows through the eyes,
plan on making the big catch.
There is nothing to do but wait.
I have beer and you have wine
so we drink, and for a while it seems
we can hear the ground cooling with the night.

I realize we've been here for days,
our camp well established,
but we've had too few catfish, too many crappie,
and no bass.
I talk about our good fortune in being here,
watch the insects pile up inside the lantern,
still crawling and struggling,
though their wings are burnt to dust.
You, too, consider it luck, and
we pull in our lines to make sure
we haven't lost the bait.

I am caught on another sunken branch,
a rock, or maybe a large turtle.
Finally it comes loose;
I reel in another empty hook.
I am convinced there is nothing here for us,
and besides, the beer is running out, but
you want to try once more before we really give up
and head back to the tent. Still nothing.
The cooler is light, the stringer unstrung
and I notice we are the only lantern on the lake.
You are quiet and I think for a minute
of us zipped in this tent,
our only catch some bugs inside glass
and us with our wings burning away.

v. On the Uses of Flour and Eggs

Here, in this bowl,
at this table where you
wait for words,
yolks leave their whites,
eviscerate themselves, stain
ground grain
gold.
With this rod of wood
roll them out;
press them thin as vellum,
sheer as rice cloth;
pound out a
parchment
that refuses pen and ink and every letter;
unwind a wordless winding
sheet, a paper
shroud.
Wear it like a mute.
Wear it like an ordinary skin.

The Plaza in San Martin

Think of a pear-shaped old man slowly
crossing the square
counting the bricks
from church to cantina,
his chin on his chest.

Think of a black haired girl
curved over her baskets
breasts brushing the straws
just as you placed her
round curve of nape, back, buttocks, thighs, knees.

Think of parrots in wicker cells
screaming flashes of color
that bleed through the air
and flutter to the clay bricks.

And remember the heat waves
rolling across the square
in circles from the dry stone fountain
in the plaza's center
over bricks, over bowed heads
over cathedral bells' roll.

Telling Life from Art

I remember watching television,
a huge pillow in my lap
while I punched it in a fury
each time the villain
in a cowboy movie
snuck up behind the hero.
People should face each other
if they wanted to fight,
I thought when I was seven.

My mother would rush into the room,
out of patience with the pummeling
that crashed out of me;
she would calm me, for a moment,
by saying it was only a movie,
only happening to someone
who wasn't real.
But I knew better.

I have learned to hide my snarls,
the bites I used to give
with watch-dog ferocity
to that ragged sack of feathers
my mother kept for me to tear apart
in tantrums of justice outraged.

I watch more quietly now,
while newscasters catalogue
the daily horrors of children abducted,
bodies found mutilated,
policemen firebombed
for praying in the wrong churches,
villages smashed to rubble
because they call their churches mosques
or synagogues or churches.

After a while I turn the station
or switch off the set
and shake my head;
if I let myself I could shake it right off,
but I have learned my mother's lesson
all too well, perhaps,
and tell myself it is happening
to other people
and is therefore only a movie,
not the terrible, the real thing.

Eavesdropping

They sit at the next booth,
four women sipping soft drinks
and talking. Actually, three
talk—about the fourth,
who, I suppose, smiles, to be so much
the center of their conversation.
"What a face you have," one exclaims.
All I can see is the black haired
back of her head, but fantasize
features off a painter's canvas,
a Botticelli or Titian,
or a movie star's photo at the least.
"I know women who would kill
for your cheek bones," another says,
having to stop her hand from tracing
the outline, so taken by bone structure.
"There's no substitute," the third chimes in,
"for your personality, dear."
I imagine her beaming by now
as if it were Christmas.

Then they rise, say good-bye, and leave,
their heads high as if they were meeting
the kind of men women dream about
in old movies on rainy afternoons.
I watch the fourth rise
with a clumsiness born of pain
endured over a lifetime.
She limps back to the counter,
one side of her body jerks
with every step she plunges forward.
I poise at the edge of my seat,
hoping I won't have to lunge at her
if she loses her balance and tumbles
like a wind-up doll staggering
over a floor littered with toys.

The Way Down

St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York 1982

Spring breaks like a fever over its cold and clammy face. Everything that could have risen is gone. And still the spires, daggers of the Church, hang restlessly from the sky. A tired shopper rests, cradling her bags, on the steps. A bum sleeping in the doorway turns and clutches his paper bag of whiskey. His death, which will come later as spring fades like a vaudeville act and dissolves to winter, will be as luminous and without sense as the light rain falling on his frigid skin, so that the shopper stumbling over him will think, for a minute, of something frightening, before thinking that he's merely in the way.

There's so much that must be accounted for: the blind and the dumb thronging the streets, the pale serpent sleeping in the chancellery. And the walls, the white that isn't white but an assault on its opposite, on darkness, on everything that can't be seen, dark heart, dark stone, the enemy silently collecting in the cracks and the corners and the vague half-moons of the spires, drenching the stone in its solitude, lighting the way down.

Courtesy

The dirty exhausting town,
the hundred flies on the cutting block—
we can't absolve anything here.
It's apparent in photographs,
as I catch you handing a mistrustful boy
a coin. That boy
will follow us home.

This afternoon, I take my place
beside the old beggar
at the corner of Calle de Jesus—
the one who plagues me
and wins her little war.
My hand darkens in shadow.
I am about to mumble
whatever she mumbles
to see if coins will come winged
from the white hands of strangers.

Now I've awakened
and I can't go back.
All that is left
of evening is dinner,
and some poor woman's hand
extended through the window,
her fingertips nearly
touching our table.

Between Hoodoo and Silver Falls

A woman grows garlic, wild cucumber,
pulls nettles, is stung and is caught
by a passing bird, its fancy plume.

She bends to the wild blackberry, the weight
of the axe. Hemmed in and torn, she hacks
a clearing, reaches out to the flamboyant

vine maple, one dogwood bloom. The woman
rests on the trunk of an old alder, sees
how it crawls, hugs the bank of the creek,

the creek choked in blackberry, skunk cabbage,
rotting logs. She digs rock from the pasture, pries
and tugs, rip-raps the bank. The wild rose

was planted by a woman. A woman panned gold
in this creek, cleared land, reaped mushrooms,
dandelion greens, shrivelled and died. A woman

picks her way out of hemlock shadows, cleans
the dirt from her nails, touches the trillium
and hears the eagle perch, knows the limb bends,

touches ground and her. She counts blooms, the years,
picks one. And when there are twenty she twists
blooms onto blackberry vines, twenty more

she skewers with thorns and then there are six.
A woman, barefoot in trillium, crushes petals
and laughs. She is breaking the law, the seasons.

Salomé

The lips, salt-cold
and dolphin-white, tasted
of the sea. I gave
them back the desert
with my own. I cradled
him in veils and pressed
the mouth against me
till I shivered. I was
too young and small
except for dancing. Let
my mother nurse
the loving dead—I will
chafe those lizard eyes
like the wind. The slits
will follow and the dark clots
widen on those swathes
of silk as I weave
and bow. Let my father
fatten on his years
and my mother wait
forever—I will
pry those lips apart again
for song.

Calling Them Back

"Fana, Fana," my black-haired neighbor calls her black dog;
Her black-haired baby claps, calls *Hannah,* her own name,
Cries *shirt, apple, grape.* The dog leaps in;
Hannah cries *dog,* praising dogs, her own cries;
Praises grapes which might fly to her in a swallow's beak,
Apples which might sprout from the gray birch,
And all the red shirts, sailing in like carpets
When they hear their name.

There are moments when your hands around my face
Make words; they say *river, pear,*
The high rock where we slept,
A bag of fruit cooling in the water.
Some mornings your hands speak the pear's cool flesh,
The dappling poplars,
Gestures that make fruit and water from dry air,
Calling things,
And holding them when they come.

In the Garden

in the dewy mesh
of string bean leaves

I find a bird so used
to precision flight

that its tangle
in the furious wheels

of a passing car
must mark its only,

fatal,
miscalculation.

The flight feathers
beneath the snapped wing

tremble like petals
of new squash buds,

the shiny eyes still
black as marigold seeds.

Come back, I whisper,
but it can not hear me,

is empty
as a hollow wing bone.

Tied to tomato stakes,
white rags

shudder and mimic flight,
fall back,

earthbound imposters
pinned like laundry on a line.

I pluck the bird
from the leaves.

make a nest of squash vines
and bury it like a bulb,

knowing that if I wait
long enough

something made of the bird's
will to taste the marigolds

will be yielded up
from the dense earth

copper-winged and
whole.

Realm of the Hungry Ghosts

They tell you everything
grows in New Orleans.
Pythons slip from trees at night
in slow contractions like tides
moving through the river.
A native tongue is not spoken
only listened to and there is no sound
now, just a sputtering of streetlamps
and the insomniac nuns of St. Roch
hunched over their own intensities.
Away from the Quarter
the clicking hundred legs of a sax
someone fingers in the drizzle
without blowing.

Girl on a White Porch

Where do they go, the young boys, glass
splintering their hearts? Called back?
It was the same river: car overturned.
His yellow hair covered the rocks like grass.
Somebody held him, he would not get up.
Who was that girl who held her brother,
her blue dress and the evening finished?

In those days the shell road followed the river.
Alone on the porch swing among the wisteria:
the girl and her brother.
And the trees heavy with oranges,
and the heat on their limbs like a hand
through the hosannahs of the tree frogs.

Rain settles on the elm. A Keatsian mood
contaminates the lawn, tells the tale
of their innocence, the wet streets
shining like licorice. Because in poems
we weep for ourselves, in sepia weather
that spreads like a river.

When we are through with nostalgia,
will the two halves, memory and desire,
finally call them back?
No more a summer of hothouse flowers,
a girl on a white porch and all the wisteria
falling to touch her.

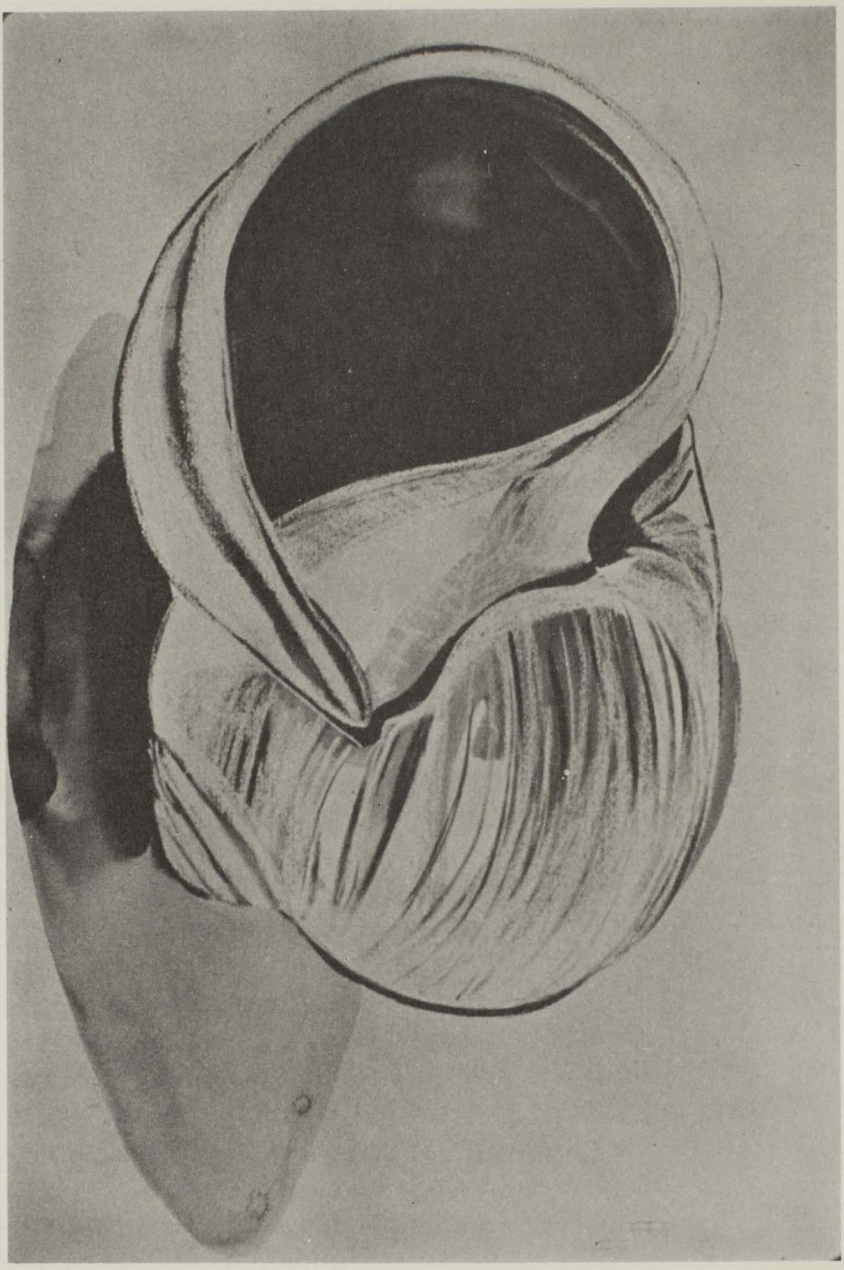
Flambeaux

> "Sing your songs, Rupert the Rine,
> but I'll not listen, though they tell me
> you've a sweet voice."—Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Because the woman was in paradise first,
the paradise of her body: a hybrid, Creole gift
of white skin, eyes dark as a marmoset's,
and the paradise of frangipani, even of humidity
which bathes the thing and washes it,
and slows the passing of time, like a clock
thrown in a river, winding down . . . her auntie's
cotton stockings, cotton drawers, cotton slips,
all washed fresh and ironed on a hot day
when the work girls come laughing home from church.
The first thing that burns is the sun doused in the ocean,
and the same burning in Our Lady of Immaculate Conception,
framed in the parlor over the armoire,
(her heart with its sword on fire),
and the burning of the boys' flambeaux
at carnival, because the black boys carry their flames
out of the heart of the island, on all of the islands.

Because the woman was in paradise first
there was no where else she could go
but down, over under, through and into,
the sound of carnival carried into the trees,
the wild, frangible girls in their feathers and gold,
and like the cypresses that drink up the sound of the river
she drinks up the sounds of the carnival, though her auntie
put cotton in her ears and into her own ears. . .
Now they have lit their torches and begun their dances
and the woman, watching from her safe veranda,
is infected with those flames
just as her mother's house married the fire

as she would one day marry the fire
rushing headlong into the caesura
burning up her days in a cold place in a red dress,
the only thing that burns and consumes
in her purgatory of snow, in distant England.
Sing your songs, Rupert the Rine,
all these islands is burning now.



White Shell: inkwash, pastel on paper by Page Allen

Living like the Grasshopper

an interview with Nancy Schoenberger
with an introduction by Bronwyn G. Pughe

Nancy Schoenberger is the author of the TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER (Calliopea Press, 1979), which won the initial Montana Arts Council "First Book Award". (Her book is currently distributed by Graywolf Press, Port Townsend, WA.) She has had poems in numerous national publications including a recent feature in *The American Poetry Review.* Ms. Schoenberger is the recipient of a 1984 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship; August and September, 1984 Residencies at Centrum, Port Townsend, Washington; and will be spending February, 1985 at the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy.

Nancy Schoenberger
Photo by Joan Graff

Ms. Schoenberger received her M.A. from Louisiana State University and her M.F.A. from Columbia University where she was co-editor of *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry and Prose.* Like most writers, Nancy has also put in her time in fast food chains, cocktailing, and reading to blind students. More notably, she has taught Freshman Composition at the University of Montana, taught Poetry-In-The-Schools in Montana, and worked for an independent producer on a documentary series on poets for public television at the Center for Visual History. Ms. Schoenberger was an associate producer for the pilot film on Ezra Pound. She currently teaches a workshop at and runs the book awards program for the Academy of American Poets (AAP) in New York City.

Like many authors, Nancy Schoenberger draws on her childhood memories as well as her present experiences and insights for her work. She says her second collection of poems, GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH, "draws on my Southern background, something that continues to engage me the longer I live outside of the South."

* * * * *

Five years ago, you made a major move from the Northwest, Missoula to be precise, to the East Coast, just as your first book, THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER, was coming out. Your first book was published after being chosen for the Montana First Book Award. You were also a Poet-In-The-Schools in Montana, taught as an instructor at the University and taught a center course in poetry to the general public. Some critics look at your first book as falling under the Northwest school. Do you feel this is fair?

SCHOENBERGER: I wrote most of the poems in THE TAXIDERMIST'S DAUGHTER while I was living in Missoula, and of course, no one writing in that area at the time could escape the seductive presence of Richard Hugo. I didn't study with Hugo (though I wish that I had), but I feel as though I absorbed by osmosis some of Hugo's precepts and methods: his ability to create character, to tell a story, to evoke a place strongly enough to express a whole attitude and philosophy. In his case, it was one of despair and longing, which is always beautiful and seductive in verse (Joseph Brodsky has said, "The language wants to be tragic.") I have tried to do these things in my own work—with what success I can't say. (That's for others to determine.)

This is a huge country without any real "national" poet or poetry (not since Whitman), so it makes sense that poetry flares up in regions. I was influenced by the Northwest, but I don't identify with it, nor do I identify with "East Coast" poets, a region that enjoys a certain stamp of acceptance and visibility because so much of the machinery of the literary world is in New York and Boston: publishers, agents, grant-making and other literary institutions. One of the things I have tried to do at the Academy of American Poets in New York City is to bring poets from other regions to New York for the benefits of mutual exposure. This year I am proud to say, we're sponsoring a festival of Northwest poets and a festival of Southern poets and I hope that, by doing this, we can establish an ongoing series of regional programs in New York. I think the division will always be there, and I think that's okay (as long as they are divisions and not barriers). After all, who wants a homogenized poetry that appeals to all people? The country is already becoming too homogenized, one town looking exactly like the next with its shopping malls and Burger Kings, etc. It's the specialness and specificity of a place that can nourish the imagination. Look what Faulkner did with Mississippi, or Flannery O'Connor with Georgia, or Frost with New England, or Hugo with the Northwest, for that matter. To those regional poets who feel shunned by the East Coast establishment (and that would include 80% of all poets, probably) I

say, create your own awards. Of course, this is already happening to some degree, with state arts council grants, but I would love to see foundations like the Academy or the Poetry Society springing up in other parts of the country. New York is a grant marketplace, but we all know the work has to have value outside the marketplace, and other schemes should be devised to note and appreciate its value.

Did the exposure of your first book help your career or your move? What about the exposure as a back cover feature in A.P.R.?

SCHOENBERGER: Alas, my book was never really "exposed." It was a limited edition to begin with, and then it simply was not distributed very widely, not at all on the East coast. And, since I left the Northwest just when the book came out, it was sort of a non-event for me. I hope that doesn't happen again. Regarding the APR back cover, I did get a couple of fan letters, but I think they liked my picture better than they liked my poems.

Did your work change due to your move?

SCHOENBERGER: Hmmm, my work changed when I moved to New York in that I was exposed to Eastern European writers by studying with Joseph Brodsky and later with Derek Walcott, whose Cribbean poems turned on a light for me (not to mention his virtuosity of craft and language). I realized I could write about what I loved, what drew me, and not just about the immediate sea I was swimming in. That was a revelation—you can write about what you love and about the things that delight you, once you discover what they are.

Other than yourself, who do you see as other up and coming or important contemporary poets and why?

SCHOENBERGER: The contemporary poets I read with the most enthusiasm are all women poets: Gjertrud Schackenberg, Elizabeth Spires, Louise Gluck, and Elizabeth Weber (whom I knew in Montana and who also won a "First Book Award" for SMALL MERCIES, a beautiful and persuasive book).

You have spent this past year traveling, to Italy and to South America, and doing various residencies in Port Townsend, Italy, etc., and pretty much living off of your N.E.A. grant. Has this particular grant helped you to obtain others? And, has living in New York helped with contacts towards being able to live and work as a writer?

SCHOENBERGER: Hmmm, interesting questions. First—I would have to say, no. I don't think the NEA has helped me get other grants. Maybe the Rockefeller Foundation residency—It's hard to say, as I did apply to that one after receiving the NEA, which was not the case with the Port Townsend residency. But I've been living like the grasshopper and not the ant; that is, making art and not storing up for the winter, so I haven't been applying for further grants during the past year, except for the Bellagio residency (Rockefeller Foundation) which seemed like a gift from heaven. A friend told me about it and urged me to apply—I had never even heard of it.

What do you feel is in store for other writers and yourself in light of the current governmental trends?

SCHOENBERGER: There has been a lot of panic regarding the possible drying up of funds for the arts, due to Reagan's philistine conservatism, but I haven't personally seen this happen *yet.* The next round of NEA fellowships for writers offers $20,000 grants but this could change a few years down the road as Reagan's attitudes become more entrenched. I really can't say. I have heard, unofficially, that literature grants may be cut by as much as 35% in the near future, which seems very possible. Time to retrench, to do what writers have always had to do, figure out a way to live, and write, too. It doesn't look good.

Has being a woman writer made a difference?

SCHOENBERGER: I don't think being a woman writer has made a difference in my case in terms of attracting grants and residencies—I haven't made that an issue in my own work or in the presentation of my work, although I admire several women writers who have. There are periodicals and agencies that are interested in promoting women's literature per se, which is a good thing, but I haven't gone that route. I suppose I have

benefited from the efforts of women writers in this country to be heard and to be taken seriously, and I add my voice as another part of the ever-increasing stream. I happen to think that the most interesting poets writing today are women, though I don't know *why* that is so. Perhaps it's all that stored-up energy bursting out after centuries of silence.

Do you plan to stay in New York? I know when you left Missoula you planned to complete your MFA at Columbia and then were open. Now you've been in NYC for nearly five years.

SCHOENBERGER: I didn't intend to stay in New York City, and I still don't think of it as "home". But after a certain age it becomes very hard to move, to support oneself. I would like to divide my time between New York and Louisiana. I love to travel, and New York is a good place to travel from.

Has the experience of working as an editor on the Columbia literary magazine affected your work?

SCHOENBERGER: Yes, in that it sharpens your eyes and it makes you more impatient with work that falls short—that's competently written but has no spark or daring, which is always the great bulk of what's submitted (and published!) anywhere, at any time. It makes me impatient with the mediocre work of others and also impatient with my own work.

What direction are you taking in your work now?

SCHOENBERGER: More of the same—trying to discover and immerse myself in my "roots"—an odd thing for a woman who grew up moving every 2 years of her life as a child. I am very drawn to tropical, sensual landscapes. I guess I am a sensualist. I like big, splayed and dripping flowers and tumultuous rivers. I like the heat.

You have a second book completed, GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH, and making the rounds. What are its prospects, if you can reveal them?

SCHOENBERGER: I really can't say right now what its prospects are.

Would you tell us something about the book?

SCHOENBERGER: GIRL ON A WHITE PORCH, draws on my Southern background, something that continues to engage me the longer I live outside of the South. I try to return to New Orleans at least once a year, where my mother's family still lives. I was a Navy brat, but I spent summers in Louisiana going between New Orleans and the DEEP South of Buras, Louisiana, Cajun country. I just returned from a trip to the Amazonian basin and I kept thinking while I was there, why, this is just like Buras, Louisiana! As a child, it seemed pagan, rich, oppressive and alive to me. Like the Amazon. The Mississippi is also a wild and legendary river.

Do you have plans for a third book? Do you plan to try for foreign publication since you will be spending more time abroad?

SCHOENBERGER: Nothing begun at this point for a third book, though I do think it will be rooted even more ostensibly in the South than the second manuscript, which includes some work inspired by the Northwest, and a section on Italian painting. I would like to spend more time in Louisiana and I would like very much to return to the Amazon, though I don't know if that's possible at this point. For some reason, I find the climate and landscape evocative, nourishing.

What attracted you to living and working in the Italian culture? What is different about being a writer in this culture and in particular an American woman poet?

SCHOENBERGER: I am sorry to say I don't have a good answer to this one—nothing really. My month in Bellagio in February will probably be spent writing poems about being a little girl in the South. I did spend a month travelling through Italy, and, like any tourist, I loved it and was inspired by the Renaissance paintings, frescoes, and sculpture. I did a series of short poems with the title "Galleria" describing several of my favorites: Fra Filippo Lippi's "Madonna with the Child and the Angel," Beato Angelico's "Annunciation," a stunning fresco by Bartole di Fredi,

"The Creation of Man." A tourist's admiration, I'm afraid. I am delighted to be going back, especially since Bellagio is a place of extreme beauty, but I'm not a student of Italian culture nor of the Renaissance, and I really can't comment on contemporary writers in Italy. I suspect that North America is the best country to be writing in at this particular time in history—after all, one can go to college and study to write poems, and even get a degree in it! All one lacks is an audience! The poet has enjoyed tremendous respect in the Soviet Union in this century, and still does; the poet isn't necessarily respected here, nor listened to, but he/she is allowed to continue, and may even be encouraged by an occasional grant or fan letter. I have gotten two (fan letters). On the other hand, getting a degree in "Creative Writing" imparts a false sense of respectability and acceptance. We're kidding ourselves; to seriously undertake the writing of poetry, which has little or no value in the market place, is a slightly mad act. The old guard poets are perhaps rightly suspicious of the "Creative Writers." Still, one *can* find some nourishment by taking classes and meeting with other writers, and I do think that's a good thing, rare in the world.

You have taught creative writing among other things. Could you comment on poets and academia, i.e., how does the situation effect the quality of your work, the impetus to work, the amount of your own work you are able to get done? Would you like to or would you consider teaching again?

SCHOENBERGER: I haven't taught in an academic setting for some years now, since leaving the University of Montana, although I teach a workshop now at the AAP, which is a nonprofit arts organization that offers several programs for a poetry audience. I love teaching—small, select groups of course! and it certainly can help in one's own work, in that it can clarify ones own ideas and tastes in literature. The danger lies in substituting the satisfactions of teaching and talking about literature for writing itself. Because I only teach three to four classes a year now (ten week classes), this is less of a problem. I think being a full-academic is a mixed blessing: you have, usually, a fairly congenial work schedule, at least part of your duties involve talking about the things you love or at least like, you have a certain legitimacy as a writer or scholar. But as everyone knows who's been involved with academia, the politics, the professional jealousies, the emotional drain of teaching a heavy class load, the sequestered nature of working within an institution can all have a numbing effect. I think I'm fortunate to be able to teach on a part-time basis, and work on other pro-

grams on a part-time basis, which leaves me a few extra days a week for my own work. And time to travel, which is very important to me. Again, there's no formula, at least as I've been able to figure, for the right way to make a living if one is also a writer. I just keep trying different things to keep the writing life alive, and to pay the rent.

How does place, where you live and work and where you have lived and worked, affect the content of your poems? Does the notion of expatriotism enter into it? It is a part of our history and present as many writers, including yourself, choose to live abroad for both brief and extended periods of time.

SCHOENBERGER: In a sense, I have chosen to live in an area I consider alien to my sense of roots, my sense of place, which, as I have described earlier, is caught up with the notion of deep South. I say notion because my idea of it is mixed up with early childhood memories, my experience of living in Louisiana for seven years as a very young woman, my impression on short trips back South: an amalgam of memories, truths, and myths. It's not the South I would evoke if I were living there. I think if I lived there again the *place* would be consumed in the business of daily life; its mythic qualities would be lost. So in a sense being separated from a thing that you love can add to its mystery and beauty. If being an expatriate means essentially being cut-off, then I think it can affect and enhance the writing, the recollecting of the experience, of the place. I think the faculties of memory and imagination are very close—one flows into the other so easily. C. P. Cavafy is very eloquent on this point, particularly when the memory is an erotic one as in his poem. . . .

BODY, REMEMBER. . . .

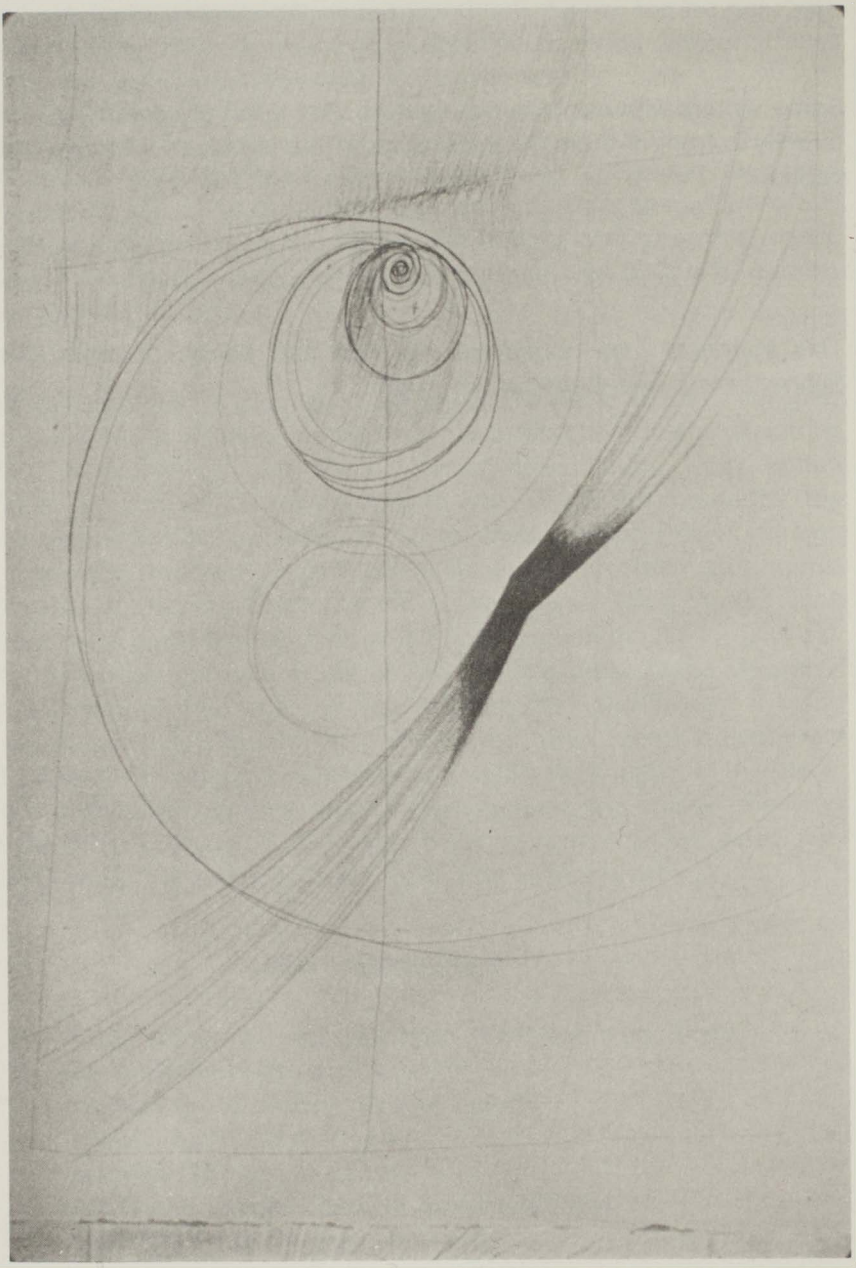
Body, remember not only how much you were loved,
not only the beds you lay on,
but also those desires glowing openly
in eyes that looked at you,
trembling for you in voices—
only some chance obstacle frustrated them.
Now that it's all finally in the past,
it seems almost as if you gave yourself
to those desires too—how they glowed,
remember, in eyes that looked at you,
remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices.

C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems; Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherard; Edited by George Savadis; Princeton University Press, 1975.

Some writers with a marvelous eye are very good at describing what is directly in front of them; I prefer to begin in a nebula of memory and invention.

* * * * *

This interview was conducted by mail and phone between Nancy Schoenberger and Bronwyn G. Pughe.



Time Frame, no. 3: graphite on rag paper by Page Allen

Among the Lettuce

There among the earliest lettuce in the garden, I saw a tiny figure of a man. I took it, at first, to be a doll, but as I approached I realized it was a real human being. He was perfectly attired for tennis — down to the white terry cloth sweatbands on his wrists — and he was sunbathing in a hammock stretched between two sticks that marked the ends of the rows of Black Seeded Simpson.

He greeted me without surprise and with a voice much louder than would be expected for anyone whose mouth was no larger than a cherry pit. I said hello and squatted down beside him. He removed his sunglasses to get a better look at me, revealing eyes as round and intense as a parakeet's.

"My partner never showed up," he said, "and it's just as well. I strained my back serving yesterday. You know how it is the first days of tennis weather — you get there and exert yourself without thinking about how you might feel the next morning."

"You play?" I asked. It seemed only polite to enter the conversation just as I would with any person, and not embarrass him by calling attention, right off, to his unusual size.

"Not as much as I used to," he said, "and not as well as I might. But classes are over now and I have nothing but final papers to read. Forty-five papers on *Ulysses*, and seventeen comparisons of Updike, Oates, and Cheever."

"You teach?" I asked.

"Those who can, do," he said, "those who can't, teach," he said, "or have I got it wrong?"

"That's close enough," I said, and I stretched out on the grass beside the garden. I confessed that I, too, was an English professor. We taught at nearby colleges in a part of the country over-supplied with institutions of higher learning. That he had never heard of me was no surprise. I had been in the area only since September and was on a short-term replacement contract, which means you don't bother to make friends because you won't be around that long. That I should not have heard of him was, of course, remarkable. His name — Conrad Avery — rang no bells. No one had even hinted that such a person, a person with such an unusual deformity, existed on a faculty so close by. He had been there, he assured me, for eight years.

"Do you have tenure?" I asked.

"I got it last year," he said, "and it was quite a struggle. There are people in my department who feel that because of my specialty—"

He stopped for a minute to re-position himself in the hammock. The word "specialty" seemed like a nice way of putting it, something I would not have thought of myself.

"It's Twentieth Century British and American Literature," he said, "and my department is rather conservative. They are worried that courses in what they call 'popular' writers will attract students away from courses like Chaucer and Milton. But my friendship with the president of the college helped me out. You see," he said, "we're both from the same suburb of Pittsburgh and share an ambivalence of affection and aversion towards the place, and, in addition, we share the same defect."

He paused and leaned towards me. My first thought was that there must be something about the town where they had grown up — proximity to the steel mills perhaps? — that had affected their genes, since it had to be more than coincidental that two people from the same place should be handicapped in such a peculiar way. My second thought was that it was highly impossible. For a homunculus to rise to the ranks of a tenured professor at a distinguished college was one thing. But to imagine that someone could overcome such tremendous obstacles to become a college president was something else.

"We're both southpaws," he said, smiling a smile that took up most of his face but was, in fact, only half an inch wide.

It was clear, then, that he was not going to bring up the subject of his size, and I decided to do my best to avoid it. When he asked me about what works I was teaching in my freshman literature survey I caught myself just in time before including *Gulliver's Travels.* It must be painful, I thought, for someone who has to cope with the realities of a physical handicap to talk about a work of literature where such a handicap has been exploited for the purposes of satire. We talked instead about *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sons and Lovers* and the poetry of Wordsworth, which we both disliked and which was part of the curriculum I had to teach.

Conrad's particular interest was the modern short story, but he was quick to point out he was no admirer of experimental fiction. His secret mission was to make his students appreciate the values of traditional realism.

"I always include work by the so-called 'experimental' writers in my course. Their cleverness entertains my students for a while but when they've had enough of the intellectual games they run back to Chekhov with relief."

We talked this way for quite some time. Long enough for the sun to shift so that Conrad was now almost entirely in the shade of the lettuce leaves. Soon he consulted his miniature watch and informed me that he had to be heading home. He unhooked his hammock and stowed it away in his nylon sport bag.

"It's been good talking with you, Marya," he said (I had told him my name earlier on) "and no doubt we'll be running into each other again soon."

Mercifully he did not hold out his hand for me to shake. I would not have known how to manage it — whether to extend my whole hand, as gently as I could, or offer a finger, only.

"I'll look forward to seeing you," I said, and I started back to the house. I did not turn back to watch him, just as I would not have turned back to watch the exit of a cripple, but I found myself picturing him heading off through waist-deep grass.

I went into the house and fussed in the kitchen long enough so I was sure he was far out of sight. Then I went back to the same spot where I had been sitting before, to think.

Several things disturbed me, in addition to the most obvious. For one thing, I was puzzled by Conrad's proprietorial attitude towards my garden. There he was making full use of my lettuce markers without having the courtesy to consult my feelings or to at least thank me for the liberty he had taken. It was a small matter, but it was the key to something larger. Conrad gave no indication that there was anything unusual about his behavior, just as he gave no indication that he knew there was something unusual about his looks. It seemed to me that the situation demanded at least a perfunctory sort of explanation, and his neglect — unconscious or calculated? — was a kind of rudeness which seemed inconsistent with the rest of his behavior.

And then there was the question of the tennis partner who hadn't materialized. Was there someone else around who was as tiny as Conrad, or did he play tennis with someone of normal size? How was that possible? If Conrad were hit by a regulation size tennis ball during even a slow volley, he would probably not survive the impact. Yet a tennis ball proportioned to him might well pass through the holes of his opponent's racket.

The question of the tennis balls brought up another issue. I had enough difficulty finding clothes that fit me properly — and I'm a woman of average proportions — where could someone like Conrad outfit himself? I knew that doll manufacturers had extensive wardrobes for miniature human replicas of both sexes, but although the versimiliture was striking, at least from my distance, I doubted that dolls' clothes were really functional. Would Conrad be able to find tennis shoes that were a comfortable fit and a watch that really ran?

Where, I wondered, did Conrad live? How did he shop and cook and eat? And why hadn't I ever heard about him before? I could understand how someone could manage — if he knew enough influential people — to keep his life safe from the press, but I would think that in academic

circles, at least, word of him would have gotten around. I wondered how it was possible for him to actually perform his academic duties. He would obviously have to dispense with things like writing on the board and bringing his text to class. I thought of the physical labor that would be required for him to just read a book on his own, walking back and forth to turn each page.

That the encounter had been real — that I had been in my sane and proper mind — I had no doubt of. The small sticks marking the lettuce rows had clearly been bent towards each other to accommodate the ends of his hammock, and although I am a person who dreams, I have never had any trouble separating my dreams from reality. And if I were to dream about a tiny man I would no doubt conjure up a leprechaun in a costume befitting his size, not an academic Homosapiens in tennis shorts.

I had no one nearby to talk to about my encounter. If I were to call up some of my good friends — all of whom lived at considerable distances — they would no doubt treat the matter as a joke. It was something I was sure Conrad had had to suffer his whole life, and I was disinclined to have him laughed at by anyone if I could help it. My friends would certainly ask me all the questions I had been asking myself. And what could I say in answer?

That night, before I went to sleep, I took out my copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. I felt somehow guilty doing this, as if I were insulting Conrad by merely thinking about him and the Lilliputians in the same sentence in my mind. I knew the book very well, but I turned to it now with a kind of excitement and a kind of fear.

I read about Gulliver's travels to Lilliput where he is a giant among the population, and then I read about Gulliver's travels to Brobdingnag, where the people are giants and he is relatively Lilliputian in size. What had made my encounter with Conrad extraordinary was his treatment of the situation. He seemed to overlook, and seemed to expect me to overlook, the differences of size that Swift had made so much of. In both parts of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver is the wrong size compared to everyone around him. But with me and Conrad the situation was different. If you looked at just the two of us alone, it would not be clear which of us was out of proportion.

I went to sleep exhausted from struggling with philosophical questions about size and scale, and awoke sometime near morning after an unusually upsetting dream. In my dream I was lying, undressed, in a secluded corner of my yard, and Conrad, still in tennis clothes, was doing warm-up exercises on my naked belly.

The source of my dream was immediately clear to me. The night before, I had left *Gulliver's Travels* open to a section that I had always found amusing but for the first time found titillating as well. It was a description of

Gulliver in Brogdingnag being played with by the maids of honour at the palace: "They would often strip me naked from top to toe, and lay me at full length in their bosoms. . . . The handsomest among these maids of honour, a pleasant frolicsome girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her nipples, with many other tricks, wherein the reader will excuse me for not being over particular."

I tried to go back to sleep but it was impossible. I was upset by my dream, even though I understood its source. I wondered about my own feelings about Conrad. Certainly I wanted to see him again. But did I want to see him again because I had found him—and obviously this thought worried me most of all—faintly attractive?

I went downstairs and hid Gulliver's Travels alphabetically out of order on my shelves, with its spine facing in.

The next day it rained and I did not expect to see Conrad, but the day after that was sunny and he didn't turn up. I thought about calling him, but could think of no excuse. He had left nothing behind—I had checked by the lettuce just in case—and I did not feel comfortable about inviting him over for dinner or a drink. I felt frustrated, and I felt angry at him because my awkwardness was in part his fault. By pretending there was absolutely nothing unusual about him he had made it impossible for me to inquire about any of the difficulties that might come up. If I asked him over would I offer him a thimbleful of sherry? Would I shred the cheese on the cheese tray into pieces the size of grains of rice?

When he finally turned up, a week later, the circumstances were similar to those of our first meeting. Again he offered no explanation for his presence in my lettuce, acting in fact as if that area of the garden had always belonged to him. He seemed pleased to see me but acted as if our first meeting had been in no way out of the ordinary, and again he made no reference to anything about his size.

In addition to talking about literature, this time we talked about music and theatre and a little bit about ourselves. I found out that Conrad was an avid stamp collector and that he played the rebec with an early music group in the area. I imagined that he held it cello-style between his knees. Apparently he had a fairly active social life and was up on current events in the area. His references to his "dates" surprised me, but I was secretly pleased to discover he was not married. It occurred to me then that he might have a certain charisma for some women. I remembered a crippled student in graduate school, and another who was blind, who were both very popular with members of the opposite sex. Perhaps there was a kind of woman who was attracted by a man with a handicap, a woman who likes to feel needed. Or perhaps such men were attractive because they compensated for their handicaps so well. Perhaps all men were handicapped in some way and some just manifested it more obviously than

others.

When Conrad felt it was time to take his leave, I seized my courage and asked him to dinner. He was busy the coming weekend, he said, but he was free the Friday after that.

"Wonderful," I said, and since I was feeling a little bolder, I decided to ask him what to cook. He interrupted my question by telling me he would be there at seven and he would supply the wine.

"White," he said.

The wine got delivered by the local liquor store exactly an hour before his arrival. It was a fine chateau white Bordeaux, properly chilled. I had been worrying about dinner all week and had finally settled on squab a l'orange—one for both of us—wild rice, salad, and trifle for dessert. The silverware and dishes were the greatest dilemma, and finally, on Thursday, I had driven all the way to New York to F.A.O. Schwartz, where I purchased a doll-sized service for eight.

A taxi dropped him off. I heard it arrive and looked out the window to see it pull away. Conrad came, as I might have expected, perfectly prepared. He had a small wicker picnic basket, which he used as a table, and his own plates, glasses, and silverware. His delicate wine glass made the ones I had bought look like crude toys, and I hid the whole set in the kitchen.

We ate in the livingroom, at the coffee table, which he easily mounted with the aid of a few books I had discretely placed on the floor before he came. Through the entire meal he made not one reference to anything about his size and I found that I soon forgot about all the difficulties I had been worried about. Once involved in conversation, it no longer seemed at all strange to be dining with someone no larger than a squirrel. In retrospect, I realized that not only did Conrad not shy away from situations that might present difficulties for him, but that he seemed almost to invite them. He left me to pour the wine but insisted on carving the squab, himself. When a piece of lettuce had the misfortune of sliding off my fork before reaching the destination of my mouth he leaped to retrieve it and restored it to my plate. I had seen this kind of phenomenon in effect before. There was, for instance, a professor on my own faculty, a white-haired gentleman who looked like a portrait of God in a child's illustrated Bible, who had a terrible stutter. Professor Pickering not only spoke at faculty meetings more frequently and longer than any other professor, but he also chose to speak on emotional subjects which raised his ire. Because of his remarkable self-confidence his stutter seemed to be a phenomenon that was happening not in his mouth, but in the deformed ears of his listeners.

I should say, at this point, that one of the less predictable perils of the oddity of our relationship—although perhaps not one that Conrad was

as innocent of as I—was that the bottle of white Bordeaux was not shared quite equally. I filled our glasses the same number of times but ended up consuming most of the wine myself, and a half-bottle is often sufficient to render me slightly inebriated. I found myself, not long after the trifle had been eaten and before the coffee had even been served, in a compromising, though in no way unpleasurable state of disrobement in my bed.

There are—if the popular press of our time is correct in having us believe—a substantial number of women in America today who indulge in sexual activities that other members of our society might find alarming, at best. There are certainly even more women who fantasize about such activities. Certainly what were once traditional boundaries—things like race, and age—have been challenged, and even the most conventional woman, may, in some situations, admit to having fairly bizarre appetites in sex. I should say, quite definitely, that although my imagination was no less fertile than that of any other member of my sex, the thought of intimacy with a man one eighth my size, had never once occurred to me. Had I thought about it I would no doubt have been stopped by trying to imagine how intimacy in such a situation could possibly occur. A kiss itself, would seem to pose insurmountable difficulties.

What happened with Conrad was that these difficulties never arose. He was clearly experienced with women and secure in his own sexuality, and he had developed ways of achieving sexual satisfaction for both himself and his partner that seemed at once perfectly natural and unquestionably appropriate. He performed, in fact, so skillfully in bed, that he almost made me question how sexual satisifaction could ever be reached by two people of relatively the same size..

Our relationship progressed with predictable smoothness and rapidity after that. We spent more and more time together as the summer wore on. By the end of July, although Conrad was still paying rent for his room in a colleague's house nearby, he was actually living with me. When his parents came up for a weekend visit they stayed with us in my house, and seemed not the least bit uncomfortable that we were sharing a bed without benefit of marriage. The morning after they left, I mentioned this to Conrad at breakfast.

"Your parents are such wonderfully liberal people," I said, "they seem to accept us exactly the way we are."

"They're remarkable people," he said. "They've never seemed to feel that I was any way different from any other child. My mother's only remarks on the subject were that I saved her the expense of maternity clothes and made for a perfectly painless delivery. I think their attitude has made it easy for me to expect that same acceptance from the world. And I've found, as you obviously know, that people are comfortable with me

because I am comfortable with myself."

I was quiet for a minute. It was the first time that Conrad had ever broached this topic, and although I had almost brought it up on many occasions I had always finally held myself back. It seemed amazing to me that it should come up so easily and unintentionally.

"Conrad," I said, "I was talking about their attitude towards our cohabitation, not their attitude towards you. But I'm relieved we can talk about that now because it's been a subject I've been afraid to bring up."

"What subject?" asked Conrad.

"You," I said. "Your size."

"Afraid to bring it up?" asked Conrad.

"I felt it was something unmentionable, something that—"

Conrad cut me off. "You mean it's been bothering you all this time and you've been afraid to bring it up?"

"It hasn't been bothering me," I said. "I mean it's not been bothering me that you're—that I'm—so much bigger. But it's bothered me that we've never talked about it."

"We never talked about it," said Conrad, "because I had no idea that it was something you wanted to talk about. How was I to know it was something on your mind?"

"You don't have to get angry," I said.

"Something's been on your mind all this time, something serious like this, and you've been keeping it to yourself," said Conrad. "Don't you think I have a right to be angry? Don't you think I feel hurt?"

"I was just afraid that if we talked about it, it might become a problem—I mean almost as if it was something that was fine as long as we didn't—"

"Mention it?" shouted Conrad. "Do you think our relationship's so fragile that talking about something would ruin everything between us?"

I pressed my fingers over my eyes. "Isn't there anything, Conrad," I said at last, "that you've been afraid to bring up? Are you so different from me? Don't you have anything on your mind? Don't you have any secret questions, any secret doubts?"

Conrad was very quiet for a while, too. Finally he looked up at me and spoke.

"O.K.," he said, "I'll tell you. One question. Something I have always worried about with women. Are you attracted to me in spite of my size or because of it?"

I thought for a moment. I didn't know what to say. My first thought was "in spite of it," but that didn't seem exactly true.

"I can't answer that," I said, "because I don't think of your size anymore. I mean I just think about you, you the man. I can't separate those things. I don't think of your size as something any more special about you than the color of your hair or the curve of your mustache."

"Is that the case?" he asked.

"That's the case," I said.

I guess it would be fair to say that at this point we realized that we had fallen rather in love. And the outcome of it all was that we decided to formally plan our lives together. The only real obstacles in the way were coordinating our academic careers and breaking the news to my family.

My parents, unlike Conrad's, were not wonderfully liberal people. I wrote them a letter that informed them of my impending connection and only hinted, as softly as possible, that the groom might not exactly fulfill their image of a son-in-law.

My mother called the day they received my letter. She said they were delighted that I was going to get married—I was, after all, over thirty—but they were concerned about the implications of my note. My mother thought it was a question of religion. My parents had come to accept the fact that I was not religious myself and that I might well marry someone who shared my lack of belief. But they wanted the religion my spouse had rejected to be the same as my own. When that matter was settled, my mother moved on to race. She did this as delicately as possible, since my parents are theoretically open-minded.

"Thank God," said my mother, when that matter had been settled. And then, in one breath she broached what she thought were the last two dreadful possibilities. The first: that Conrad had been married before and had left his wife and children for me, the second: that he was gay.

"No Mom," I said, "it's nothing like that. It's something quite different."

"What else?" cried out my mother, five hundred miles away, "what else could there be?"

"He's small," I said.

"Oh," said my mother, obviously relieved, "there's nothing so terrible about that. Your father's short."

"Not just short, Mom," I said, "small."

"Small?" asked my mother.

"Small all over."

My mother was clearly struggling to imagine what I meant. "How small?" she asked.

"Very small," I said, and then I decided to get it all over with. "Eight and a half inches, four and a half pounds," I said.

First my mother was very quiet. Then she laughed. Then she was very quiet again. Then she got angry.

"Marya," she shouted at me, "Marya, what are you talking about?" Then she called my father to the phone.

My father, who had been watching television, was annoyed at being disturbed. He had to be filled in on the entire conversation. He thought I was up to some joke and in the background I could hear him tell my

mother that she should calm down, didn't she know a joke when she heard a joke?

"It's not a joke, Dad," I said. "His name is Conrad Avery. He is an Associate Professor of English. He is thirty-seven years old. And he is unusually small."

"Small?" asked my father, for the first time, taking me seriously, "how small?"

"At this moment," I said, "he is sitting in my hand."

My parents refused to come to the wedding and we decided to get married by the college chaplain by ourselves. We wrote our own brief ceremony, composed of lines from our favorite works of literature. Conrad had bought me a delicate gold wedding band, which he put on my finger at the close of the ceremony. I had not had one made for him, because he never liked jewelry on a man. We spent our honeymoon on Bermuda, where Conrad insisted on paying a full double occupancy for our cottage overlooking the ocean and was offended when I suggested that he might negotiate with the airlines for a special rate.

The problem of coordinating our academic careers was put aside for the time being. We had already decided to start a family and when my contract was up at the end of the year I planned to take some time off from teaching to write.

The doctor in New York, who had facilitated my pregnancy, had predicted that it was extremely unlikely that what he called Conrad's "condition" would be passed on to our children. He reminded us how fortunate we were, since if it were the woman who had the "condition", not the man, having a child, who would most likely be normal size, would be out of the question. Both Conrad and I were relieved to hear him assure us that unlike skin color, in cases of size difference, blending does not exist. Both of us would be happy to have offspring of any size, as long as they were healthy, and, as Conrad jokes, "shared our tastes in literature," but we would no doubt find it a real strain on our marriage—as would anyone—to have to adjust to a child who was some abnormal, intermediate size.

Nights in Värmland

The sack hung about Paul's neck. He stood at the edge of the clearing. "Over here, Gunnar! How's your mother?" he asked.

"She complains of the cold," Gunnar said.

"And you?" asked Paul.

"I've no complaints at all. How would that look, my getting cold?"

"If I were cold, I wouldn't admit it either," said Paul. He had the face of an owl.

"But it's too late for *you*," Gunnar responded. "I'll pray for your rest."

"Don't, not for me," Paul said. He was forty-five. One hundred and forty-five.

Gunnar walked past him through the thicket into the wind. *The cold having taken them, such men as Paul are lost,* he thought. *In the treacherous snow, he's lived for years refusing prayer. Instead, he wanders the cold frozen with sin. Too far from the sun, he accepts the darkness and cold.*

The shelter where Gunnar lived faced the cardinal points. It was deliberately built that way. Gunnar headed toward it now thinking how you could guide yourself by the cross on the roof. It wouldn't let you stray.

Evil cold touches my face, but wandering, I'm still not lost with the cross up there. One can pray and mend his ways. The owls, wolves and bobcats are lost. Paul with the sack about his neck, the others, the hundreds of others, yes, they are all lost. Throughout the woods wander treacherous, evil, mean-spirited sinners consumed. But me? No. They have my prayers.

In the failing light, he made it home, the wooden cross guiding him. It looked somber against the sky. There were paths to the strange places where dead spirits stood. At night the air filled with smoke. These were the fires of men who couldn't be warmed. *The stinging night offers them nothing,* thought Gunnar. *There is little consolation in the eternal winter of this cold, dark place, only the snow drifting about the shelter's eaves and blinding their eyes on St. Lucia's night.*

Despite others available to him, Gunnar broke a new path going N-NE to avoid the cardinal points. They were good points, good directions from which a lost, wandering soul could learn—as they could from the crucifix. But you sometimes couldn't see the cardinal points in the night, and the cross was merely a shadow, the night offering nothing to go by. He'd done right, Gunnar told himself, to make a new path and to save for sinners

the ones that approached from the cardinal points. That was the right thing.

"Gunnar!" she hollered and banged the alarm kettle with her hammer. She expected something, Gunnar thought. A storm? her death? her very own death? Is that what she's doing? Banging it away with an alarm kettle? Keeping her own death at arm's length? Is she out-banging the noise of her sins with that hammer, outfoxing the noise of that cold with those blankets, those walls? I'm doing right building her inward, for strong walls keep sin out, I was taught. Walls keep Syl Magda safe inside. My mother. Mine. Syl Magda. No sin, shame, strife shall enter here tonight. Nothing shall attach itself here. No, not tonight . . . to her . . . No!

She lay in bed complaining when he came in from the fine snow that began to fall. And she kept on banging. When he told her, "the ice sparkles, will you come see it?" she banged out her sins with the hammer and dented kettle. When he said to her, "Mama, I'm going out shooting under the full risen moon," she wouldn't listen but kept banging at the kettle. *"Fader vår som är i himmelen,"* Gunnar prayed. Outside, the fox made off with the winter's chickens. It was a sad, strange thing all around.

"Do you hear it in the chimney?" she asked over her banging.

"No."

He was wearing the lighter coat. He'd succeeded in boarding up an inside window—not with the broken hammer he'd fixed and given back to her to bang the kettle with, but with the good, sturdy hammer.

"Sleep?" he asked.

"No, put more rags under the door. I'm cold," she said.

"More rags," said Gunnar.

Clutching the hammer, he went to work across the room. Shaped and planed, some fresh boards waited. He set to on the north wall. With the saw, nails, chisel, plane, the rule, the two hammers—one sturdy, the other broken—he did his work. He raised the strong walls to shut Syl Magda in and keep her from cold. Outside, the world's sins and the cold wind, but inside the walls would keep her safe, warm, and quiet.

The pattern of the inner walls followed that of the outer. Already he'd raised beams and made a roof four feet below the original. The walls of the cabin were 30 × 35, the next room's 20 × 25. To keep her from evil, he'd built a house within a house, a cabin within a cabin, a prayer shelter within a prayer shelter. Then there was the newest room. Third, innermost, it stood another few feet in from the last one he'd built. He was working on it now.

Outside all these walls, the wind shook the treetops. In the new room, he caulked whatever holes or knots appeared in the boards. He'd built it with windows so that you could look right out through three prayer shelters—one inside (or outside) the next—to trees, to firs and white birches, trees of the night and winter time. But now he was boarding up these windows, not building or refurbishing the shelter and the windows, but boarding them up.

"Under the door there's a draft."

"Under which door?"

"I don't know. I'm mixed up," she said.

"There's nowhere else to move you. I'll come give up my coat."

He blew the sawdust away from where he was working, lay the coat gently on the four-post bed, which was wooden—handmade like everything else in there. Inside in the center, she lay, her bed raised on wooden blocks. On the elevated bed, she was higher than he.

"The chimney, is he there?"

"No," said Gunnar.

The woodstove by her bed provided heat to the cabin. Dust and soot filtered down when he craned his neck up into the cold fireplace chimney. (There were three fireplaces in the cabin too. He had laid stones for all of them. In every way the three fireplaces were identical.) He was busying himself inside the shelter now.

She was right. In the chimney darkness: there was something up there.

He opened the door, rushed the few feet to the next, and through that to the next. Outside it was a night where sin lived. He shielded his eyes against the moon, saw something above. Now the river heaved and dislodged its ice in patterns on the shore.

"Come down," he yelled.

He could barely hear his mother call. "Do you hear it in the chimney outside?"

He didn't answer, could hear her hammer against the night.

The wind swirled. He'd left open his heart. He raced to the door. The wind ripped his coat. Sweeping the snow away, he slammed the big door shut, slammed another.

"Stay in," she said as he slammed the last. "Don't go. This night help to keep me from trouble. I'm seventy-nine."

She's not seventy-nine. She's little more than fifty-four. He didn't know what made her talk so. He thought of leaving forever the innermost shelter with the raised bed in the center. There was too much to find out in the forest dark. Sometimes he watched the night wheel by. Dressed in furs down on the river, he thought how he'd never been part of the night, not like the beasts whose skins he wore. In this cold land he'd observed night

and sin, but neither embraced nor understood them. Sin and the night world he'd never understood.

He and Syl Magda, his mother, had travelled here long ago searching for Gunnar's father, who'd set out from Värmland. Gunnar's father had sailed N-NW, becoming trapped in the ice, at which time he'd stepped out upon the windrow and died—not spiritually, not that way, for it was not a spiritual wanderer, but a good, honest man who died. Some peasants had sent him to the nearest village, which was named *Paradis* of all things—or *Djurgaard.* Finding Gunnar's father there on the northern ice, they'd sent him to *Paradis* and continued their own journeys looking, in sorrowful penitance, for loved ones who themselves had died, though in less desirable ways.

Gunnar was now twenty-two years in the Lord's service. Did one never quit? Coming north, he'd had no fear of being defiled. He'd never had cause to fear for his soul. "You can't and won't sin," they'd told him in the church as a child in Värmland. Over the years he'd prayed and kept lights in the prayer shelter's windows, lights in the night of death and smoke. It was his mission. *I'm ministering to dead souls in this outpost of faith. I can teach them. Like Paul, the owl-man, they are doomed, but I can teach them why they wander.* He kept a light in the prayer shelter so that if they should look in, it would be on the workings of the prayerful family; the mother and son, Gunnar and Syl Magda Johannsen. *As the farmer reaps wheat, so must I, at such great distance from the sun, reap snow. . . .*

"The chimney!" she yelled.

From the roof he heard cries. He didn't believe there was anyone out there. He stoked wood, added a log, went to bed. He was no part of the night world. He'd learned to sin, but in small ways. He'd felt neither terrible cold like her nor the night of sin. "There's no man up there," he yelled. "Nothing! No one."

Because he slept just outside the newest room (third, innermost), he found he must wear skins and furs to ward off cold.

In the morning he sprang up. He went outside to check the prayer shelter. Then he hurried back in, shut the door, then the next. It was a bad morning, and it chilled him—but not with the chill of sin. Was his own good, holy mother possessed of the night and cold? he wondered, closing the last door.

She held out her hands.

He soothed her. "What is he like, Gunnar Johannsen?" she whispered.

"No one's out there, no thing, Mama," he said.

"Well, do you have to keep going out?" she asked.

"I can work inside on your room. Are you any warmer? It's bad."

"No warmer. Is he up there?"

"No, no one," Gunnar said.

"You're lying. He's coming down trying to get me. I think he's the cold heart of my nature."

She rolled over. He fed the stove.

"The draft's bad," she complained.

"I'll go to work on it. Didn't I say I would?"

He was a builder, a keeper of a lighthouse. He climbed up on the ladder to the third room's ceiling. Efficiently and without complaint, he did God's bidding. He was a listener, too. At twenty-seven years of age, he sought the woods to understand what he could from them. He did not understand his good mother's suffering a sinner's torments.

That blustery day he worked round her bed, her face looking like a hawk's . . . a crow's, thought Gunnar. Her hands curled inside each other. She'd been that way a month. "The draft. Can you do something about it?" she begged.

"No, can *you* do something about it?"

He strung a line. He was touched with grief. Outside, people wandered. Perhaps I have brought cold into the house with me, he thought. Perhaps *I* am tainted with cold and coming unto her high, holy bed a sinner.

For only a minute she was without a blanket, long enough for him to run the rope line from one corner of the new prayer cabin to the other. Then he strung another line. When the ropes intersected, Gunnar moved her on the bed. The lines met over her belly, exactly there and she was centered. She was exactly as far from each corner. In the process she'd been blessed by the cross the ropes formed over her belly. He gave up a hearty thanks. Perhaps because of the sign of the cross formed by the rope she would be getting better, he thought. Perhaps that was what she needed.

The thing—it was an owl, a snowy owl with wings five feet across when it flew.

Going out, Gunnar carefully pulled rags from the bottom of each door, but replaced them carelessly on the outside. No doubt drafts would come in, he thought, but in the woods he couldn't hear a complaint anyway. To get away from here I can go as far as I choose, even out among the wolves and bobcats to learn of sin's cold, its grief.

When the moon was full bright, the crucifix threw its shadow from one

bank of the river to the other. He made squares out of the moon's pattern on the snow. Kneeling in the center of the frozen river, he threw off his cap. One square held his coat; one his boots; one his cap; the last his belt and gloves. Each square contained him no less than a minute before he retrieved his items from the treacherous snow. Paul watched him the night of the eclipse; Paul, the owl who was an old man.

"What are you doing?" he'd said.

"Praying," Gunnar'd responded. "New prayers. Never-said-before prayers. Come here with me to the center of the square. These aren't conventional prayers."

"See how you've destroyed the shadow of the cross? I'm not sorry for you, Gunnar," Paul said.

After that, Gunnar'd gone home and driven his nails truer than before. Later that night, he knelt and prayed again that the snow make better sense to him. But Syl Magda called to him, interrupting his prayers.

Under the bright moon, Gunnar spotted the owl. It had been two days up there.

"Come down from our roof!" he hollered. "What do you want? No one's here!"

It fluttered around in the chimney. He was silent, the moon gone under when he closed the outer door.

Past midnight she started the hollering and banging. From the outer rooms he rushed to where she lay.

"What is it up there on the roof? What do I hear all the time?" she asked.

"There's no one up there," Gunnar said. "I saw no one."

"You saw—"

"I saw no one up there."

"You wouldn't notice my dark nature," his mother said. "Look at me . . . my hands. Please light me a candle. Say prayers for my safe-keeping. Purge me with hyssop, son."

"Mama."

"I'm cold on this raised and centered bed now."

"I'll lower you."

"I know what he carries round his neck. See if he doesn't."

The light was dim. She complained to the crucifix over her bed. He prayed. She was silent, shaking.

"I can feel it," she said.

She was curling up on herself. Hands, arms, shoulders curling up.

"Father in heaven. . . ." he prayed, "*helgat varde Ditt namn*," then quit when he saw the owl's face in the window. Gunnar's ma thrashed about. He stoked the fire, bundled some furs over her. He went out of the

shelter where she yelled from the elevated bed, went out, shut the inner door, opened the next, shut that, opened the next. Snow flew up. He edged around the corner. He was standing there facing Paul, who had the bag slung about his neck. Paul waved, gave the bag to Gunnar. The snow came between them, and he was gone.

Indoors, Syl Magda was still crying. She'd gotten so thin, so old. He loved her. He was like her more than anyone at that moment. He stepped into the prayer shelter.

"You saw him, Gunnar. Please talk to me about him. I will choke on my words if you don't talk."

Gunnar was silent. When she started in this time, her voice was higher.

"I'm sick of the cold," she said.

"It's much warmer in here," he said.

She was talking about a coldness of sin he'd never felt.

"How did I know it was part of my nature to do what I did?" she said. "That man out there who's trying to get in, he got a speck of something—soot, dust—in his eye once."

"Yes."

"I leaned over him, licked his eye in the old country way."

"With your tongue you licked his eye."

"I did lick his eye."

"And I was a baby in my chair, you said?"

"Yes. And this was in Värmland and your father had just set out to this mission place of dead souls. And this wasn't the one time that I licked his owl's eye. I willingly did so. You in your chair I turned to the wall and hummed a melody to calm you while he waited in the room's shadows. He looked ancient when a pine knot burst and threw sparks around his feet. By then your father was gone two months. Prayers to the Heavenly Father fell on deaf ears. . ."

Gunnar rose up, shook his head, took the cross from over her bed.

"I'm sick. I'm sick, dying. I can feel the cold, Gunnar. I'm full of sin's cold. Please pray and protect me, Gunnar!"

"Please pray and protect you," he said.

He gathered the crucifix, the rope he'd made measurements with, some drawings. Syl Magda begged him not to take them away. She was weak, curled around the blankets.

"*I'm* sick," he said. "I'm the sick one."

She was speaking to him as he left the room.

In the window the face of a man whose fingers scratch away at perpetual frosts peered in. Gunnar saw from inside the room, could watch him right through the windows. Gunnar carried the bag about his neck. There were the three of them in that desolate scene: Gunnar, Gunnar's mother, and

that cold and ancient master. She was wild. She didn't know where she was.

"Rest," he said.

She tossed her head from side to side. In the next room, he prayed. Not for her, but for himself. She appeared to twist in half. Bent up, old, she hollered for him.

"Son! Son!"

"Mother! Mother!"

He was praying hard. He read the sign in the window frost, the same as he'd made in the river snow.

"We cut each other's hair. We kept it in a bag. We did that," she said from the other room, "each time he came over. We talked about it. How evil! When ice went out into the lake my hair was on the table in Värmland. We'd cut it short. There was some power we shared. It wasn't a good thing, Gunnar. I'm not sure what to think about it. I didn't know he died—now to show up, the dead man at my door. He reminds me of the coldness and treachery of sin."

"You're not sure what to think," Gunnar said. He himself was learning from the forest. He'd learned things out there. Because of his faith he was *just* learning. One thing was a new way to worship. *That is why—no longer alive to the warmth of prayer—spirits wander in death outside the window. Without warmth, without hope of light.*

He shut his eyes, tried not to shout when he opened the bag that hung round his neck.

"I'm dying!" she yelled.

"You're dying," he said.

"Cover me from the cold, Gunnar."

"Cover *me* from the cold, mother!"

He turned his head away and with a chair propped open the inner door. He kicked rags from the bottom, opened the next door, kicked those away, opened the next . . . opened the entire shelter to the cold.

"Please help me," she said.

"Please help you," he said.

"I need some water now!"

"You need some water now."

He poured a cup from the dipper in the bucket. He dusted the surface with ash, handed her the cup.

"Thank you," she said.

"Yes. Thank me," he said.

In the other room, praying, he dressed for the forest cold. "*Jesu!*" he muttered on the way out.

Night trees caught his fur. He travelled through ash-dirtied snow to the

gloomy places of the soul, observed others silhouetted against their fires. Gunnar saw the twi-lit sky.

She licked his eye when he had something in it. That was not the first time. Before father died, she consorted with souls whose cries now echo the smoke-filled sky and hang like slate-gray ribbons from the trees.

Night and cold claim their own. But I am the truly sick one. For I renounce my building inward and my narrow rooms, a narrowness which I thought would provide. I renounce her—Syl Magda. And because now she begs in the midst of pleading for water and more covers, I throw off her blankets and salt her water with ash.

He went deeper, removing the wolves fur where some hazel brush had caught it. He was their keeper and the single light in the forest. He walked through their fires and knew he was their guide. Then he heard someone calling from deeper in yet, a man who looked like an owl.

"This way, Gunnar, here! You were teaching me down there on the river. Can you believe such a thing? That *you* were teaching me? Down on the river where the crucifix was. . . ."

Gunnar removed his heavy gloves. Now there was no fire. No light whatsoever brightened his face. A fierce crying off somewhere in the wilderness.

"Here, this way, Gunnar, this way where we no longer have to listen to her futile beating against the cold. . . ."

Ray Holly

But what disturbs me most
in the leafy wood
is the to and fro and to and fro
of an oak rod—

Seamus Heaney,
From Sweeney Astray

On a morning in late August, with the summer fading and the leaves beginning to wither and with the metallic keening of locusts rising from the roadside weeds, Warren Schober drove the green Chevy dump across town to remove a dead oak tree.

In the seat beside him Ray Holly sat, smoking cigarets, tapping his boot on the dash and sipping from a can of spit-warm Pepsi while the greatest hits of James Brown thumped and bumped from a little Panasonic, dangling from the rearview mirror by a carabiner. "Cold Sweat," "Sex Machine," "I Can't Stand It" — it was a heavy dose, Warren thought, for seven a.m., as now and then it moved Ray to stick his head into the rush of air and bawl out the words to the world at large. The voice was high and ragged, a surprising one, coming from executive sired, Poughkeepsie born Ray Holly. Warren glanced at the sunburned, nearly beardless face, the wire-rim glasses, the curly hair wind-whipped to a froth, and then to the scarred, nicotine-stained fingers that had hung from every vertical face in Yosemite. Inside of a month, Ray would take his summer's earnings, his soul tapes and his honky locks and fly off to climb in the Chamonix. And he would take Gwyneth, too.

Warren thought of the summer evenings at Ray's third floor sublet. The walls were yellowed and bare, except for the picture poster of the Eiger Ray had tacked up — massive, snow-covered, sun ricochetting from the top. He remembered the long twilights on the back porch, beneath the sooty canopy of the tree of heaven: Ray, in constant motion, trying his French and Gwyneth's dark head bobbing with laughter at his insane patois, the way the jug wine went to their heads while the chicken lay charring on the coals and the smoke trailed high into the night.

Warren turned off the expressway and headed due East, and though he slouched in the seat and arranged the visor every which way, for the rest of the drive he was eyeball to eyeball with the sun, so that when they pulled up to the single story cape in east Revere, he was half-blind.

Ray clambored out of the truck and disappeared around the corner of the house so he'd be first to the tree, as he always was. From behind the hemlocks, his voice staggered towards the upper registers:

"I don't care about your *past,*
I just want, uh!, our love to *last* . . ."

Warren checked under the truck to see what had leaked out on the way over. Brake fluid, engine oil, hydraulics, it was always something. As he squatted and peered under the chassis, the memory of two nights before rushed at him so fast it nearly took his breath: Gwyneth, her mouth sweet with gin, eyes half-closed, falling toward him, falling, both of them, towards each other, as if in a kind of seizure. He remembered the explosion of breath and the soft smack of their bellies, remembered the rattle of Ray's snores, drifting from the bedroom. Warren blinked and the memory evaporated.

From the backyard he heard Ray light into the chorus: "I break out . . . uh! . . . in a coooold sweat . . . ," as there appeared on the opposite side of the truck a pair of thin, green-veined ankles, rising like stalks from a pair of slippers that seemed to Warren, a couple of sizes too large. Warren stood up and extended his hand to a boney man with a deeply lined face and a head of jet black hair.

"Miles Murphy, son," said the man. He wore a snowy white T-shirt, chino pants, and carried a coffee mug, decorated with the head of a dog. He gave Warren's hand a vigorous crank.

"A pleasure, Miles," said Warren. "We've come," he added, "to take your oak down."

"So this is it," said Miles and grinned. "So this is D-Day! Haha." There was a dazzling flash of dentures.

"Yeah," said Warren, "I guess it is."

"Boy," said Miles, and scuffed at the driveway with his toe.

"D-Day," said Warren, whose gaze fell to the ground also. A springer pup rounded the corner of the house flat out, bounced off Warren in a blur of slobber and hair, then raced between Miles Murphy's legs.

Ray Holly appeared, scowling.

"How's it look back there?" said Warren.

Ray gave an odd goat-like laugh from the back of his throat.

"Benny!" said Miles. "Get your furry butt over here."

The dog barked, danced away then disappeared back behind the house, Miles shuffling after him, coffee cup held high. Warren followed, ducked through an opening in the hemlock hedge and emerged in Miles' chinch riddled back yard. To the east stood a bank of young willows, to the west, a small elm, and in the corner of the chain link fence, bordered with bridal wreath and andromeda, stood a massive white oak, stone dead.

"What do you think?" said Ray.

Warren looked at the bark sloughing away, limbs splayed lifeless against the hazy sky and felt a loosening in his bowels.

Ray lit a cigaret, inhaled and said, "I'll bet its Ant City up there."

Ants, for openers, Warren thought. Ants and earwigs, grubs and rot.

And not a limb you'd trust your weight too.

"If they got their own city up there," said Miles, "I wonder what the hell they're doing under my sink?"

The three of them stood pondering this. Miles moved on to the next question: "Well gents," he said, "which way is she going? I'd cut the bastard down myself," he continued, "except I got a bad heart." He pronounced the word "hot" and thumped himself on the breastbone.

Warren waved to the yard in front of them, the only open space there was, and frowned. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot," said Miles, grinning. Benny sat at this feet, wriggling, panting.

Warren toed the dog and it gave him a cloying, over-the-shoulder glance. He felt a curious urge to kick it in the ass. "It's kind of personal," he said.

Miles shrugged. "Fire away."

The dog barked, sniffed, then bent with relish to his genitals.

Warren's eyes traveled up the huge lightning scarred tree and then he said, "Why'd you wait so *long,* Miles?"

Miles looked sheepish. He scratched Benny's head. At his touch, the mouth dropped open, the eyes rolled up and it appeared for a second as if the dog would pass out. "The wife always thought it would come back," said Miles.

"So she changed her mind?" said Ray.

"No," said Miles. "She died."

"I'm sorry," said Warren.

"So is she," said Miles, "haha."

Ray lugged the felling saw from the truck. He found a clean spot and sat on the grass cross-legged, clamping the big Stihl in a kind of leg lock, the lethal, gleaming teeth resting on a knee, the other leg slung over the body of the saw. Warren liked to watch Ray sharpen the saw — it reminded him of a guy wrestling an alligator. Ray filed, advanced the chain a tooth, stopped to perform a French inhale.

"Boy," said Miles. "Look at that kid smoke! Man, I gave that up a long time ago." He patted his chest.

Ray finished sharpening and stood up. "I'll climb this old bone."

"Uhuh," said Warren, and before Ray could argue, he picked up his gear and walked to the oak. He knew if younger men started doing the creepy trees for him, he would soon stop climbing them altogether. At the age of thirty-six, he thought, it might not be a bad thing. If he could only think of something else to do.

"Did you see how rotten it is?" said Ray.

"Yes I did."

"But I'm lighter than you," Ray grinned.
"Ray," said Warren, "how vain you are."

Warren followed the lightning scar into the morning haze. He moved slowly, setting each spur deliberately as the trunk tapered off within the circle of his arms. He stopped for a breather and thought: how quiet it gets in a mere forty feet. And how *flat* it is down there; as if the earth's features blurred into the only significant one, that a fall could kill you. Warren allowed that thought free rein. He believed it made him a careful climber.

Below him, he could see Ray balance on one foot, grinding it into the turf and swinging his arms to a bass line only he could hear. Warren looked straight down at the inky verdure of Miles' head, and in an instant, he thought of Gwyneth, beneath him, her face luminous in the night, the dark pool of hair, the feel of her fingers at the small of his back and Ray's snore, oddly comic, so they had laughed, both of them, and then frozen at the sound of their laughter. She had clasped his face in her hands, and her eyes swam with fear and she said, "Warren stop — I'm scared. I'm too scared now . . ."

Warren focused on the trunk before him. What the hell do you call that? he wondered. A fantasy? A nightmare? An honest mistake? He rapped the trunk with the saw handle and heard the hollow sound. And what did she mean "now?"

He rapped harder and got a muffled boom. He pictured himself standing on a forty foot column of rot held together, more or less, by bark.

"Hey Warren!" Ray hollered. "What drum say?"

Warren laughed. "Drum say: Get outta my yard!"

"Ha," said Miles. "Get outta my yard." That's great."

Warren cut the lowest branch as it sagged, snapped free and sailed downwards, shattering when it hit the ground. He watched Miles Murphy's mouth form an 'O', watched the ants stream from the stub in front of him and crawl confusedly over his boots. They sense, thought Warren, that something is amiss.

By eleven, Warren had worked his way nearly to the top. The haze burned off and to the east he could see coastline. He had not realized that they were so close. He squinted his eyes at the glittering plane of light. Flat, he thought. Even the ocean. He knew that if you just got high enough, things began to curve. He scowled. But how high was that? Something Ray would know.

"Hey Ray," he hollered.

Ray and Miles both looked up, waiting.

"Send up a smoke, huh?"

Ray nodded and lit one up. He untwisted strands of Warren's climbing rope and clamped the filter tip between the plies so the burning cigaret stood perpendicular to the rope.

Warren pulled it gently towards him, hand over hand.

"Aaa," said Miles Murphy with a huge grin. He made a swatting motion with his hand and said, "You guys — you guys know what you're doing."

Warren pivoted on his spurs and puffed at the cigaret. He did not inhale. He looked up at the top splayed over Miles Murphy's yard like a hand. Below, Miles bumped the screen door with his knee and emerged from the house with mugs of coffee as Benny squirted out from between his legs, almost tripping him. That dog, Warren thought, what an idiot.

"Coffee time, gents," said Miles.

Warren felt a sadness wash over him, though he was not certain what it was about. He tipped his head back and watched a large, slow cloud move in behind the oak top. It appeared for a second that the tree was moving, not the cloud. He knew this was an illusion, but suddenly he felt that nothing would hold — the rope, the top, the tree itself, nothing, and he kicked out and descended so fast he burned his hands on the rope.

"Boy," said Miles, startled. "When the coffee comes out, you don't mess around."

"I guess I don't," said Warren. Mess around, he thought. He unbuckled his harness and spurs. There was sawdust in his hair and down his shirt. He lifted the hem of it to let it dribble out.

Miles laughed. "Yeh," he pointed a finger into Warren's belly, "Your stuffing's leaking out."

It was dark in Miles' house. The blinds were drawn and the kitchen and halls were linoleum tile so there was an echo. Everything was waxed, dustless. The furniture looked somehow unsat upon. Through the doorway in the kitchen was a 21" Zenith switched on low volume. In the stillness, Miles put eggs on the stove to boil. Though they had agreed to lunch, Warren had never felt less hungry.

"Your place," Warren began, and Miles turned his head, "is really *clean,*"

"I try to keep on top of it," said Miles.

Ray drifted towards the living room, his boots squeaking on the floors. "Wow," he said from beyond the wall. "Who's the shutterbug?"

Miles followed him in. "Uncle Sam!"; he said eagerly.

The walls of the living room were covered with Navy photos—submarines, flattops, destroyers and a large aerial shot of the fleet as it swung into the sun, wakes arcing across a marbled sea.

"I'm a carrier man," said Miles. "That's my ship there."

He pointed to an aircraft carrier, Korean War vintage, on the wall behind the couch.

"What's this plane here?" said Ray.

"The F-1F." said Miles. "They call it the Voodoo. And this one here's the Banshee." He pointed to a flight of swept wing jets, banking towards the camera. "And these babies, these are Furies."

"Wow," Ray said, his voice husky.

God, Ray, Warren thought. You sound like such a *jerk*. "Wow—lookit the jets!" Warren watched the two of them. There was a strange similarity there, a restlessness, a lightness, as if their bones were filled with air. And if their bones were filled with air, his were filled with something heavy. Dirt, perhaps.

Warren sat in Miles' bathroom on the edge of the tub, the scent of airwick heavy in his nostrils. Voodoo, Banshee, Fury, he thought. It was a mistake to come into Miles' weird house. It was a mistake to break for lunch and it was a mistake to come down from the tree with one cut left. Mistake, mistake, mistake.

He sat and stared at the cluster of skin care products on the vanity and the bottle of Grecian formula, then the vinyl poodles dancing across the shower curtain. He listened to the harp-like plink of the leaky faucet and he watched the sweat trickle along his forearms. He thought: Ray knows.

Ray Holly sat at the table, rapping out a rhythm on the formica top. Miles stood at the sink in a cloud of steam, cooling the eggs with tap water. The windows were fogged, the hood of the stove was beaded with condensation. When Warren sat down, Ray curled his lip and raised an eyebrow.

Miles crossed his skinny legs and told them stories about whoring in Tokyo, whoring in Seoul. "You could get a Korean girl for five bucks a week. They smelled like Kimshee. 'Moose' we used to call them."

"How come?" said Ray.

"I don't know," said Miles, puzzled. "I guess 'cause they were horny. Ha ha."

There was a flicker and guffaw from the Zenith in the next room and Warren could hear the EmCee: "Let's have a look behind that curtain!"

The haze had returned. The backyard was still. " 'Yank yer crank, Mate?' he said *that?*" Warren was incredulous.

Ray frowned. "I think so. He said it really fast."

"What'd you say?" Warren asked.

Ray shrugged. "Nothing—I dummied up."

Warren snickered. "Maybe it's Navy talk for something—pass the sandwich or something."

"Old Miles," said Ray thoughtfully, "he's a very lonely guy."

A lonely guy, thought Warren. Ray. You're so compassionate.

In the crown of the elm next door there was a rustling of wind.

"About the other night," said Warren.

"What about it," said Ray. He began to pivot on one foot.

"I sure was drunk," Warren said.

Ray stopped dancing and polished his glasses on his T-shirt, then fixed his watery green eyes on Warren. "So what?" he said and gave an odd little laugh.

While Ray buckled on his gear, Warren revved up the felling saw. The 115 C.C.s roared so that the whole neighborhood seemed to vibrate. He pressed the kill switch and there was silence once again. He sniffed at the blue cloud of exhaust that hung in the back yard like a veil.

"I don't care about your faults," Ray sang, "I just want—*uh*—to satisfy your *thoughts.*"

"Ray," said Warren. "I want you to stop singing that fucking song."

Miles Murphy joined them, pointed to the mass of clouds to the east. "Getting dark up there," he said. He pronounced the word "dock."

Warren nodded. "Could be thundershowers."

Miles said, "Well I figured I could feed you anyway—save you some time."

Warren looked at his watch and it was nearly one. Somehow they had been in Miles' house for two hours. "It was great Miles," he said. "Thanks."

Miles was watching the fluid, chimp-like ascent of Ray Holly. "The kid can *climb,*" he said.

"Yeah," said Warren. "That's what Ray does. He climbs things: buildings, mountains, trees. . ."

"I don't *care,*" Ray sang, as he climbed higher. "I don't *care.*"

Miles frowned. "Can't sing worth a shit, though," he said.

Ray perched on the stub of Warren's last cut, looked up at the top. "Wow," he said. He pivoted in his harness, looked to the east, "and the *ocean,*" he said. He reached into the cavity, dug out a handful of rot and flung it out over the yard. A breeze sprang up and scattered it. To the north, the sky turned a silverly purple. Ray stuck his head into the cavity,

right up to his ears.

"Hey Ray," Warren yelled. "Finish up and get out of there."

"There's *light* down there!"

"Jesus, Ray, finish it up!" Warren yelled, suddenly furious.

The clouds moved in and buried the sun. A gust of wind blew up little dust devils and set them careening around the yard, and Warren could smell the tannin from the oak and he could smell the rain coming. In the world of Ray Holly, he thought, this will pass for fun: the wind blowing sixty miles an hour, rain on the way and Ray hanging there in the middle of it, singing, laughing, having a ball.

Warren watched Ray set himself to make the cut, lifting his knees high to drive the spurs tight, the top shuddering from the impact.

Miles grinned and made a swatting motion with his hand. "You guys," he said. "You guys are *crazy.*"

"Do you really think so?" said Ray.

"Aww," said Miles "Sure I do."

"That's good," said Warren. "Sometimes I think we're just stupid."

From the top of the oak, Ray said something but the wind snatched his words away, and the clouds swarmed overhead. Warren heard the saw sputter, catch, and rev, Ray notched the top towards the open yard. As he began his back cut, the elm next door tossed violently. The wind shifted and rushed out of the west, rolling over them like a wave, catching the oak top as it settled towards the yard, pushing it backwards till it hung poised over Ray Holly. Warren watched, helpless as Ray yanked the saw free, dipped his head and pushed, pushed till his arms shook and his face went dark with blood but the top was too heavy and the wind was too strong.

"Let it *go,* Ray—get out of the way! Let it go!" Warren yelled, but there was no time. The top snapped off and seemed to hang a second. As Ray tried to duck it struck him like a hammer between the shoulders, driving him chest-first into the tree.

Before the top hit the ground, Warren grabbed his gear and ran stumbling to the oak. He threw himself up it, slipping, ripping his arms and knees on the bark. He came up beneath Ray, who hung in his harness, jackknifed at the waist like a broken puppet. He tried to check Ray's neck for a pulse but his own heart beat so hard he couldn't tell. He fumbled with his rope.

"Ray," he said and laughed. "Look at this, Ray. Jesus," and he held out a hand that shook like the palsey. The wind roared, rushed over them again and he held Ray tight against the trunk until it died down. He tied himself in, then reached down to pull Ray's head up. There was a gurgling from deep in his chest, but Ray's face was unscratched, the glasses intact. The idea that Ray was fooling him possessed Warren, and he started

to giggle.

"Ray, you ding dong, cut it out."

Ray gasped. A bright bubble of blood formed on his lips. His head sagged.

Warren jerked him by the hair and said, "Listen Ray, you're not going to die Ray, you're not going to die, man."

He took Ray's glasses off and jammed them in a pocket.

"Hear me Ray?" And he tightened his grip.

Ray's mouth formed a word.

"What is it, Ray?" And he stuck his ear to Ray's mouth and there was a hiss of air.

"Ow," said Ray. "Let go."

"*No,* you bastard, you sonofabitch, I'll hurt you again, I'm not letting go, you skinny fuck so don't even *think* I will. Listen to me: you're not gonna die, Ray. You're not gonna die. Hear me?"

And Warren slid his arms under Ray's, bringing them around front so he could work Ray's knot and holding him to his chest, they descended. Warren stopped once because he thought he heard an ambulance, but there was nothing, just wind. All the way down, Warren kept his mouth close to Ray's ear. He said, "I'm not going to let you do it, Ray. I'm not going to let you die."

When they reached the ground, Warren could find no pulse. He clasped Ray's chin and blew into his mouth. He waited, blew again. On his lips he could taste Ray's blood.

Miles ran from the house with a blanket.

"Jesus, God," said Warren. "Didn't you *call?*"

Miles covered Ray and said. "They're on the way. Don't worry, buddy. Don't worry."

"Jesus, Miles, where are they?"

"They're coming buddy," Miles said gently.

Warren tried again to start Ray's heart. He blew into his lungs, waited, blew again. Again. Again. Finally he stopped and looked to Miles. His face was wet and he could feel the numbness creeping over him. "I lost him, Miles."

"Oh Jeez," said Miles and his old eyes filled with tears. "I shoulda took it down a long time ago."

Warren tried to speak but his voice abandoned him. He tried to stand but his legs refused. He could not, for a minute, bring his eyes to focus. Finally he touched Miles shoulder.

From the drive they could hear the ebb of a siren, the hiss of a radio as the rescue van arrived. From the house, the spaniel barked furiously.

To the east, Warren could see the willows heel over, bend double by the wind.

Clay Sculpture by Fox Joy McGrew

Jack Heflin
The Map of Leaving
The Montana Reconnaisance Project
Missoula, Montana
1984
$5.00

Grappling with the paradoxical heart of experience, Heflin's poems engage the reader in a real world where the price of initiation for the seeker is never easy and involves losses that clear the way for hard-won victories of the spirit. In them, there is growth, an outward-turning knowledge that allows the reader to partake of the quest and share in the illumination. The perils met are expertly rendered, as in "The Hitchhiker," where what is loved, like a brother, the hitchhiker who is always leaving, can so easily be lost.

> I glanced outside the passenger window
>
> where my reflection was mirrored. . . .
>
> The wind pushed hard against my door,
>
> dawn unmasked the prairie.
> My brother's swollen face
>
> loomed in the jimsonweed
> that bloomed along the highway.

The accessible language and fresh imagery bring to life the characters which share his landscapes and heartscapes. Heflin's experience balances what is terrifying with what is beautiful:

> *Hold it,*
> he says. We turn our flashlights on the drunken blur
> of a child's foot webbed in mud and flint.
> And the dogs, suddenly come up unnoticed in the wind,
> let go howls ringed with a little of that silver
> we'll all find at the bottom of our graves.
> (from "The Treasure Of The Raccoons")

Heflin's imagery and language, the careful crafting, serve his strong sense of narrative. With the poet, the reader faces the baptisms. Balanced as an athlete who not only knows his sport but feels the lives of the players on the field, this is a poet whose work doesn't float off the page, isn't so painfully confessional that there is no room for the answering song of the reader. There is something to be learned from each game.

Some of my favorites are "The Sawmill," "Mules," and "The Sleepwalker." The final poem, "Good News," is a beautiful work, full of substance, of grace, as the celebration of spirit reaches a crescendo.

I've talked to no one for twelve hours
but if I spoke now, I could say nothing wrong.
Huddled around red fires lighting the river,
the shadows of fishermen grow into
the shadow of forest back of the ice.
Curled and rocking I listen to the low talk
of the mother and child behind me. Her voice
is the snow thrown upward past my window.
It's not a bird, love, it's the moon.

Throughout the book, Heflin's words become what Wendell Berry calls "the fulcrums across which intelligence must endlessly be weighed against experience." THE MAP OF LEAVING deserves the Montana First Book Award, which it won in 1984.

—Pamela Uschuk

Patricia Goedicke
The King Of Childhood: A Sequence
Confluence Press, Inc.,
Lewiston, Idaho
1984
$4.95

Patricia Goedicke's, *The King of Childhood,* deals with the personal and generational complexities of a father's battle of wills with his work, his women (wife, mother, daughter and other), his children and their spouses, and even his own father as seen from an adult daughter's point of view. The title is indicative of the tyrant who can do no wrong, and the voice and imagery of the sequence are powerful enough to include many fathers, though the details of their lives might vary. Goedicke's language is complex, perceptive and biting in its accuracy as we have come to expect of her work.

Dominating the concert hall
The giant portraits of our parents

Insist we go on playing for them

For each of us has a piano on his back
And sits in front of one forever.

(from "The Husband and Wife Team")

Goedicke snares the contrary feelings towards the patriarch—towards his posed infallibility and his questionable treatment of the family. She presents an angry empathy for his troubled life and the need to feel relief in his death. In "Next Step" she writes, "Surely he is at rest somewhere:// On the shores of the cracked lake bed/ Of his children's lives// Surely a dark figure strolls/ No longer crabwise.// We

think we are glad to be free."

Kindly, in the end, Patricia Goedicke forgives with an invocation of hope.

> For you princesses
> In far meadows will get up and dance
>
> Under the spreading trees
> And soft mountains of the future
> For you let there be one more chance.
>
> (from "For Your Featherbeds")

—Bronwyn G. Pughe

Quinton Duval
Dinner Music
Lost Roads Publishers
Providence, Rhode Island
1984
$5.95

A poet secure in himself and his vision, Quinton Duval serves up the rarest of literary delicacies in *Dinner Music:* a first collection that is fresh and tasteful throughout, never half-baked or imitative. His poetry is full of confidence, humour, and sensuality, all handled with the ease of a master chef.

Duval's oeuvre begins from simple ingredients. *Dinner Music* is sliced into six sections, most with simple titles like "Love" and "Friends." But don't let Duval's straightforwardness fool you. Though each poem functions well individually, taken in sequence they reflect a journey from wonder and innocence, through bleak experience, and on to a second kind of "innocence" where love and faith become a mysterious act of will.

The book begins with "Phenomenom," Duval's invocation of the poetic impulse:

> I can go ahead
> and ask. One day
> things happen, things
> ask to be noticed.
> Why should we see
> two owls flying
> in the night wind
> trying to come together?

We feel his wonder and gratitude for these phenomena, even as he struggles with the questions they pose. Why write poems? Duval answers with characteristic ease: "Maybe I want to be a part/ of something else."

The first section of love poems is similarly optimistic, full of springtime and good humor. But Duval is too honest to remain innocent. The "Labor" and "Guerrilla

Letters" sections deal with work and war, respectively, and the world view is decidedly darker. Human life involves work, conflict, and pain, until our suffering infects even the natural landscape:

> All day long the sun has been green
> out of respect for the dead
> Green and out of shape,
> it has been clucking and shaming
> what makes it sick.
> People have to eat to fish
> and work means sweat and things
> aren't always that pleasant.
>
> ("Sea Turtle")

But Duval reserves his darkest landscapes for "Guerrilla Letters," a section of persona poems that realize the futility of fighting for change, as we ". . . constantly/ fall like the sea, growing old/ and less full."

Happily, *Dinner Music* avoids despair by closing with the remarkable "Love II" section, where wonder and gratitude have been earned through suffering and a realization of the fragile nature of human love. As the book ends, emptiness is gone, once again replaced by wonder:

> After dinner your lips open quietly to the dark
> passage down inside you. What is all this,
> this odd food we give away? We eat the other's
> love and feel amazed and full.
>
> ("Dinner Music")

Reading *Dinner Music,* we too feel "amazed and full," yet hungry for Duval's next offering.

—Joseph Martin

Jorie Graham
Erosion
Princeton University Press
Princeton, New Jersey
$6.95 paper

Jorie Graham's second collection of poetry, *Erosion,* is ambitious and successful. It explores themes of love, beauty, and death with clarity and freshness. Jorie Graham's vision is trustworthy; though she may see things in an unusual way, the certainty of her voice helps her readers enter her vision. *Erosion* is also a book of the mind—Jorie Graham is not afraid to let her intellect intertwine with the world she perceives. This honest admittance that there is more to human perception than

emotion is refreshing, and makes *Erosion* a collection that rises far above most contemporary American poetry.

The crispness of Graham's voice and vision gives her poems authority. Thus she can unite the abstract and concrete in a way that can only enlighten. Take for example the beginning of the poem "In What Manner the Body is United With the Soule":

> Finally I heard
> into music,
> that is, heard past
> the surface tension
> which is pleasure, which holds
> the self
>
> afloat, miraculous
> waterstrider
> with no other home.

It is her certainty that makes the metaphor so effective, and helps reader assent to what follows later in the poem—

> Of silence, mating striders make
> gold eggs
> which they will only lay
> on feathers
>
> dropped by passing birds
> or on the underside
> of a bird's tail
> before it wakens and
> flies off, blue and white and host
> to a freedom
>
> it knows nothing of.

Erosion is ambitious but never pretentious. Its subject is life—in particular the relationship between life and art and the way both mind and emotions understand this. For a lesser poet it would be easy to fall into cliche's or melodrama, but Graham does neither. She is fully in control of her subject even when the poem seems to be recreating her own explorations, as in these sections from the poem "Masaccio's Explusion"

> Is this really the failure
> of silence,
> or eternity, where these two
> suffer entrance
> into the picture
> plane,

a man and woman
    so hollowed
by grief they cover
    their eyes
in order not to see
    the inexhaustible grammer

before them—. . .

. . . I want to say to them,
    Take your faces

out of your hands,
    look at that bird,
the gift of
    the paint—. . .

  . . . Whatever they are,
it beats
    up through the woods
of their bodies,
  almost a light, up

through their fingertips,
    their eyes.
There isn't a price
    (that floats up
through their miraculous
    bodies

and lingers above them
    in the gold air)
that won't live forever.

Despite the intellectual stance in these poems, or perhaps because of it, there is an emotional rawness in the poems—life erodes to the sharp rocks of its skeleton. Art, love, life itself remain. *Erosion* is about this process, Jorie Graham's vision and knowledge is unmistakable. The book opens

In this blue light
    I can take you there,
snow having made me
    a world of bone
seen through to.

Jorie Graham can indeed take you there. She is one of the few major talents emerging from the mass of contemporary poets. In *Erosion* you will discover the beauty and power of what remains.

—*Neile Graham*

CutBank 23 was printed at the University of Montana Print Shop. The editors wish to thank the print shop for its patience and generous assistance.

The editors also extend a special thank you to former editor, Jon Davis, for his invaluable help in making the transition efficient for new staff.

Finally, the editors and staff wish to thank Stephen Campiglio, Jon Davis, Jeffrey Gjerde, Neile Graham and James Gurley who donated their time to read submissions during the summer of 1984.

MARGARET AHO lives in Pocatello, Idaho. Her poems have appeared in *Connecticut Quarterly* and *Wisconsin Review* among others.

PAGE ALLEN has a studio in Bozeman, Montana where she makes her home. After working in Montana's Artist-In-Schools/Community Program last year, she is exhibiting her paintings nationally.

JUNE FRANKLIN BAKER lives in Richland, Washington. Her poems have appeared in *Writers Forum, Berkeley Poetry Review, The Greensboro Review* and elsewhere.

RALPH BEER raises Polled Hereford cattle at Jackson Creek, Montana.

CORINNE DEMAS BLISS is an Associate Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College. Her fiction has appeared in a wide range of magazines, including *Esquire, Mademoiselle,* the *Boston Review* and the *Agni Review.* She has received two NEA grants, in 1978 and 1983, and work on her latest novel was partially funded by a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

ANTHONY BUKOSKI has degrees from Brown University and the University of Iowa. He teaches part-time at the University of Wisconsin-Superior and has essays and stories in *Canadian Literature, Kansas Quarterly, Matrix* and elsewhere.

DEBORAH BURNHAM lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where, she says, she wishes she were a torch singer or a lumberjack. Her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review, Kansas Quarterly, Poetry Northwest* and other magazines.

CAROL CAVALLARO'S poems have appeared in numerous magazines, including *The Nation, Prairie Schooner, Calyx* and *Poetry Now.* A winner of several prizes, such as The Academy of American Poet's college prize at Ohio State University, Carol now makes her home in Columbus, Ohio.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S poems have appeared in *Nimrod, Tar River Poetry* and *Denver Quarterly,* among other magazines. He currently lives in Bowling Green, Ohio.

JIM DANIELS currently teaches at Carnegie-Mellon University and is the recipient of a 1984-85 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship Grant. His poems have appeared in magazines such as *Poetry East, Ohio Review, Tar River Poetry* and others.

CHARD deNIORD once worked as a psychiatric aide and out-patient psychotherapist in New Haven, Connecticut. Currently at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he will graduate from the M.F.A. program in May.

RITA DOVE has recent work in *Poetry, Georgia Review, New England Review/Breadloaf Quarterly* and others. Her books of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Museum* are available from Carnegie-Mellon University Press. Currently, she teaches Creative Writing at Arizona State University.

JAMES DOYLE lives in Greeley, Colorado where he teaches at the University of Northern Colorado. His work has been included in numerous magazines such as *Beloit Poetry Journal, California Quarterly, Southern Poetry Review* and others.

MARILYN FOLKESTAD lives and writes in Portland, Oregon.

FORREST GANDER co-edits Lost Roads Publishers, a book press, in Providence, Rhode Island. He has just finished editing and compiling an anthology of contemporary Mexican women poets due out this year.

BEATRIX GATES is a poet and letterpress printer. She has two chapbooks out, *Native Tongue* and *Shooting at Night,* recent work in *Sinister Wisdom* 27, and poems upcoming in *The Greenfield Review.* She runs Granit Press, a letterpress printshop and small press in Penobscot, Maine and recently received an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College.

PATRICIA GOEDICKE currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Montana. A chapbook, *The King of Childhood,* was recently published by Confluence Press, and her sixth book of poems, *The Wind Of Our Going,* is due out in February from Copper Canyon Press.

NEILE GRAHAM grew up in British Columbia and received her M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Montana in 1984. Her book, *Seven Robins,* was published by Penumbra Press. Among the magazines her poems have appeared in are *The Malahat Review* and *The Fiddlehead.*

FRED HAEFELE lives and works in Missoula. Recent fiction has appeared in *Epoch* and *Shankpainter.* "Ray Holly" is an excerpt from his first novel, which is still in progress.

JACK HEFLIN'S book of poems, *The Map Of Leaving,* won the 1984 Montana First Book Award. He received his M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Montana and currently teaches at Northwest Louisiana University.

DEBRA HINES is a graduate of the University of Iowa with an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Forthcoming poems will appear in *The Iowa Review* and *Quarterly West.* She currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

DONNELL HUNTER currently teaches at Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho. His chapbook, *The Frog In Our Basement,* was published last year. Recently, his poems have appeared in *Poetry Now, Bellingham Review* and *College English.* He received his M.F.A. from the University of Montana.

KAREN KELLY is a sculptor who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her poems have appeared in *Colorado-North Review* and the *Beacon Press.*

CHRISTIAN KNOELLER'S most recent book is a textbook titled, *Office Communication: Developing Language Skills.* His poems have appeared in many magazines including *The Greenfield Review, West Branch* and *College English.* He lives in Juneau, Alaska.

VICTORIA McCABE has poems forthcoming or now appearing in *Tar River Poetry, Prairie Schooner,* and *Poetry Now,* among others. She teaches writing at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs.

WALTER McDONALD is the recipient of a 1984-85 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship Grant. Among the many fine magazines his poems have appeared in are *Poetry, American Poetry Review* and *TriQuarterly.* Currently, he is Director of Creative Writing at Texas Tech University. His latest book is *Anything, Anything* from L'Epervier Press.

RON McFARLAND is Idaho's first Writer-In-Residence. Besides just editing a special issue of *Slackwater Review,* he teaches at the University of Idaho. *Composting At Forty,* his first full-length collection of poems was recently released by Confluence Press.

FOX JOY McGREW is an artist living in Oracle, Arizona. She specializes in clay sculpture and recently had a showing of her work at the Yares Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona.

JOSEPH MARTIN is an M.F.A. candidate at the University of Montana. A native of Chico, California, his poems have appeared in magazines such as *Watershed* and *Digging In.*

LAWRENCE MILLMAN is the author of several books, including *Our Like Will Not Be There Again* (Little, Brown, 1977) and *Hero Jesse* (St. Martin's, 1982). His book of Eskimo translations, *Smell of Earth and Clay,* will appear this year. Millman lives and writes in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

DOUGLAS MYERS is a native Montanan who currently teaches in the Arizona Artists-In-Education Program. He received his M.F.A. from the University of Montana in 1981 and says he once ate 132 granola bars in a period of 33 days.

SUZANNE PAOLA lives in Decatur, Georgia and has work appearing in *The Montana Review, Paintbrush,* and *Chelsea.* Owl Creek Press will publish her book of poems this year.

RANDY PHILLIS is a graduate fellow at Wichita State University and plans to graduate with an M.F.A. in May.

MARJORIE POWER'S first book, *Living With It,* appeared last fall from

Wampeter Press. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Cape Rock, Crab Creek Review* and *Stone Country.* Olympia, Washington is her home.

KAREN RASCO has had collages, prints and drawings in over 60 little magazines, including *Kayak, Michigan Quarterly Review,* and *Wisconsin Review.* She is currently studying printmaking at the Art Institute of Chicago.

ELIZABETH RENFRO has taught writing at California State University, Chico for eleven years. She is also Poetry Editor of Flume Press. Her poetry publications include *Watershed, Puerto del Sol,* and *Cedar Rock,* and she authored the book, *Basic Writing: Process & Product* published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

WILLIAM PITT ROOT'S latest book, *Invisible Guests,* was released by Confluence Press in 1984. His photographs have appeared in *One World* and the book, *Wilderness: The Way Ahead.* At present, he teaches Creative Writing at the University of Montana.

NANCY SCHOENBERGER received an M.F.A. from Columbia University. Her chapbook, *The Taxidermist's Daughter* (Calliopea Press, 1979) won the first Montana First Book Award. She lives in New York City and teaches a poetry workshop at the Academy of American Poets.

HILLEL SCHWARTZ has a chapbook, *Phantom Children,* out from State Street Press. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Prairie Schooner,* and *Chicago Review,* while her fiction has appeared in *Swallow's Tale* and *Corona.* Encinitas, California is currently her home.

EDDIE SILVA received his B.A. in English from the University of Montana. In 1984, he was awarded a fellowship to pursue an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is married to painter, A. Nevin Mercede.

J.D. SMITH is widely published and lives in Aurora, Illinois.

HANNAH STEIN was a co-winner in the 1983 National Poetry Competition. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest, Kayak,* and *Beloit Poetry Journal.* Some of her work appeared under her former name, Hadassah Stein.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Composting At Forty, Ron McFarland, poems, Confluence Press, $5.00.
Dinner Music, Quinton Duval, poems, Lost Roads Press, $5.95.
Invisible Guests, William Pitt Root, poems, Confluence Press, $5.00.
The Porcine Canticles, David Lee, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $7.00.
Rumors of Autumn, Richard R. O'Keefe, poems (chapbook), Hierophant Books, no price listed.
Us, Ralph Burns, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $4.50.
Walking Two Landscapes, Greg Glazner, poems (chapbook), State Street Press, no price listed.
Water Witching, Kathleene West, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $7.00.
What We Did After Rain, Art Homer, poems, Abattoir Editions, cloth, limited edition, $25.00.
Windy Tuesday Nights, Ralph Burns, poems, Milkweed Editions, $6.00.

MAGAZINES RECEIVED

Chariton Review, (Vol. 10/No. 2) Jim Barnes, ed., Division of Language and Literature, Northeast Missouri State Univ., Kirksville, Missouri 63501, no price listed.
Colorado-North Review, (Fall 1984) L.A. Fleming, ed., University Center, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado 80639. $2.50.
Gargoyle Magazine (Issue 25/26) Richard Peabody and Gretchen Johnsen, eds., P.O. Box 3567, Washington D.C. 20007. $7.95.
Limberlost Review (No. 13) Rich and Rosemary Ardinger, eds., P.O. Box 771, Hailey, Idaho 83333. no price listed
Mississippi Mud (#30) Joel Weinstein, ed., 1336 SE Marion ST., Portland, Oregon 97202. $2.75.
Mississippi Review (37/38) Frederick Barthleme, ed., Center For Writers, Box 5144, Hattiesburg, Miss. 39406-5144. $5.50.
North American Review (Sept. 1984) Robley Wilson, ed., University of Northern Iowa, 1222 West 27th St., Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614. $2.50.
Poetry East (Number 15) Robert Bradley, ed., Star Route 1, Box 50, Earlysville, Virginia 22936. $3.50.
Sou'Wester Magazine (Spring/Summer 1984) Tonja Robins et al, eds., Department of English Language and Literature, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, Illinois 62026-1001. One year $4.00.
Tar River Poetry (Vol. 24/No. 1) Peter Makuck, ed., Department of English, Austin Building, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina 27834. $2.50.

Edenton, N.C. / Elizabeth Matheson

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